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Spring, 1946



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April, 1946, Issue

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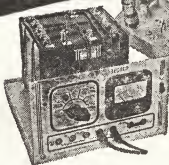
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A Department Conducted by SERGEANT SATURN

TAP that Xeno, Frogeyes, and douse the Sarge with inspiration. He needs it this time out as any fool—even you, Snaggletooth—can plainly see. Slice off my warts and call me smoothy, Wart-ears, and no offense intended.

Ye Sarge really has a question to put to the kiwis this issue. May it ring from corner to corner of fandom until all the welkin's relations are deathly ill.

What makes Anger angry?

Take a good look at the phiz Ron Anger of 520 Highland Avenue, Ottawa, Canada, has mistakenly given the Old Space Dog, Snaggle, old tooth.



Do you see any resemblance between it and any Snaggletooth, living or dead? Why, you misbegotten child of the red spot on Jupiter, you should be flattered.

Study the high and noble brow, the large and limpid eyes, the firmness of the chin.

It's supposed to be the Sarge? No, Froggie, take it awaaaay! Anger must have got his space signals mixed. That manicure of Snaggletooth's is known from the inner side of Vulcan to Pluto's frozen polar caps. Besides, where's the Xeno if this horror of the spaceways is supposed to be your aging astrogator. By the way, Froggie, where is the Xeno?

By way of accompaniment to this outstanding artistic outrage, Pee-let Anger has forwarded the

following very interesting epistle over the visiphone ticker:

Dear Sgt. Saturn: Now is the time when all good sfans should congratulate The Sarge on the Fall TWS. This lah is the best TWS for years. The cover was excellent. Although I do not like the majority of Bergey's artwork, this one was saved by the subject matter—reminiscent of the good ole days when sf mags had sf covers.

Of course the main thing is the stories and in this issue there were three stories that were way up in the sf scale. A real achievement for any mag. Maybe that's a bit restrained but in my opinion it's just as effective as using a lot of adjectives that have little or no meaning.

Of these three I think *Sword of Tomorrow* is an sf classic. The other two were *Cosmic Caravan* and *One Came Back*. *Caravan* was second only because *Sword of Tomorrow* was in the book. The short was superb writing and had an indefinable sense of power to its style—I mean, of course, *One Came Back*.

The real purpose of this letter was to ask the Sarge a few knotty questions that have been bothering my cerebral cortex for a long time. Noting the success of that Mack Truck, I kinda thought maybe even a mere male could get the Sarge in an answering mood if he used enough soft soap, but with the appearance of the Fall TWS my troubles were over! All I had to do was jot down my joy at this masterpiece!

1. Why no more stories by Leigh Brackett?
2. Who is the "O" half of Eando Binder?
3. Why no Repp?
4. Why only one answer to Cosby's sf poll? Lack of fan interest? Editorial policy? Whatever it is, it is too bad because something like this was badly needed, badly needed.

Apparently the picture was drawn more in waste than in (or should we say "by"?) Anger—or was he merely giving us the old Ganymedeian apple butter to gain a hearing for his questions? Time will tell, Wart-ears, time will tell. Or will it?

At any rate, here goes.

Brackett has been tied up in Hollywood too long and too profitably. Next, the O in Eando stands for Otto. Repp is a ditto for Brackett. As for Cosby's sf poll, apparently the thing was too darned involved for most fans to dig in. However, we are running one such answer by Delbert Grant of Lewiston, Idaho, later on in the ish. Maybe it will give you something to chew on. At any rate, it's the only reply on hand this time. But with Anger rueful, or should it be the other

(Continued on page 8)



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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

way around, Snaggie, old tooth, let's crank up the time machine and take a look at the future.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Next issue's novel is a real System-shaker, one which will have the fans shivering in the dark for a long time to come. **TITAN OF THE JUNGLE**, by Stanton A. Coblentz, long a favorite author of ye Sarge and, from comments received, of his readers, tells of the honeymoon trip of Jeff and Laura Pembroke to the West African jungle plantation of Jeff's old college chum, Mark Haverstraw.

Mark was experimenting on the local fauna with some radical new brain sera which were supposed to lift their animal I.Q. But something went wrong with the injections, and the results bring about as horrifying a honeymoon for Jeff and Laura as was ever visited on a pair of newly-weds—with a full quota of dramatic and chilling sequences for less interested bystanders!

The novelet to go along with this novel next issue is spinning rapidly toward Earth and is called **DEAD CITY**, by Murray Leinster, who needs no build-up in this column. This is the story of a great American archeologist who finds, in remote Yucatan, the half-buried remnants of a lost civilization so startling that he finds himself unable to believe it is lost.

As it turns out, Archeologist Marshall is right, so right that he is required to use amazing ingenuity to hoist with their own petard the evil beings he calls out of time. This novelet has everything.

Accompanying these two fine yarns will be, of course, a complete set of the best short stories of scientific subjects that we can find—and ye Sarge will be back for his bi-monthly beating. For **THRILLING WONDER STORIES** is back to six issues a year since the paper restrictions have eased. That alone, Frogeyes, calls for another keg of you-know-what!

LETTERS FROM READERS

Very well, Snaggie, old tooth, if you are over your unappetizing sulks, you can bring on the mail pouch. There's no use putting it off any longer or the Sarge himself will be in the bag. Let's see, how's this for a starter?

YE SARGE IS DEMOTED

by Ray Corley

Dear Private Saturn: This morning I wearily crawled into the corner drugstore, and gazed pitifully at the cashier.

"H—has it happened yet?" I asked, in tones bordering on insanity. For the fifth time she sighed, and answered:

"No, but if it does, I'll let you know." Then she picked up the telephone, and called the stretcher-bearers to come and carry me home.

I was deposited in a very unkind heap on my bed. The stretcher-bearers sneered at me as they turned to leave. Heh! I had the last laugh. They made a mistake, and opened the closet door, instead of the other one.

KLAM—BLAM—"Eeeeaagh!" They were buried under a large heap of assorted STUFF bags. Other stretcher-bearers came and carried the ill-fated pair away.

The telephone rang. It was the cashier, and she was extremely happy. "Come at once! The blessed event's happened!"

(Continued on page 103)

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Produced by **PHIL L. RYAN** • Directed by **EDWARD H. GRIFFITH**



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Humans! They were running away from him, screaming with fear

Battle of the Brains

By JERRY SHELTON

Immortal powers were conferred upon men when the colossus Klarth implanted their brain cases into invincible super-bodies—but Mason knew it meant humanity's enslavement!

CHAPTER I

A Monster Is Born

ENDLESSLY the tape droned, over and over.

"... Do not be alarmed. ... You are James Mason. ... Do not be alarmed. ...

This is an electronic brain-tape message. ... Do not be alarmed. ..."

The brain stirred, a relay clicked.

"Awake! You must remember you are James Mason. ... Do not be alarmed. Awake! You must remember. ..."

The tiny tendril of consciousness glimmered, then struggled. Poised relays thudded.

A COMPLETE FANTASTIC NOVELET

"... James Mason. . . Awake! . . . You must remember your great destiny. . . Do not be alarmed. . . James Mason. . ."

Up—up out of velvet blackness, slowly, the mind spiraled. Thought tendrils, awakening, writhed uneasily. They pushed out questioning impulses.

"... You must remember you are James Mason. . . Awake! . . . You must remember your great destiny. . . Do not be alarmed. . ."

Long stagnant thought channels connected. *James Mason?* That was him. Someone was calling. There was something he had to do—

Mason tried to move, and the effort blasted his mind with a wave of stinging agony. He had something to do, quickly, without delay. What was it? His world was a world of bottomless dark, spotted with whirling red flashes of pain.

James Mason someone had said. That was him! Memory prodded. And the pain—somehow he knew that was to have been part of it. He must expect pain. That, he knew. But why? The answer avoided him, shrinking as if his consciousness refused to face some dread knowledge.

"... Good, James Mason. . . You are beginning to remember. . . Do not be alarmed. . . The following periods will be painful but necessary if you are to succeed in your destiny. . . You few men and women of great courage must survive. . . This first impulse is connected to sight. . . You must locate and control this primary. . ."

Mason's mind jerked as if tugged by an invisible string. Sight? He had almost remembered. And that flick of a memory of the girl, her eyes brimming with tears? What—

Agony, searing bright, lashed at his mind like the cut of a whip. His darkness danced with jabbing flashes of pain, and Mason fought back in desperation. His thoughts raged up and down their quivering thought corridors, trying to stem the flashes. And failed.

"... Courage, James Mason. . . Remember that all free mankind knows you men and women are our last desperate hope. . . They thank you for your willingness to make such a sacrifice. . . The next impulse will be severe. . . It is connected to all your methods of hearing and speaking. . . Courage, James Mason. . . You must survive. . ."

IN the instant, Mason's reeling mind almost went berserk. The intolerable tor-

ture swelled. Up and up until the original intensity tripled. There, it held constant. Mason's ego shuddered. His thoughts were becoming jumbled and blurred. Distantly, he knew he had expected pain—but not this!

How did he know that? Why couldn't he see? Or hear? And like an evil cloud, the dark realization crept over him that he couldn't sense any connections with his arms, or legs—or anything. Desperate, in its agony, his mind flopped around erratically until it concentrated on one searing spot and straining, forced the pain down, and down—into nothing.

Mason thought he would faint, but his sub-level consciousness, clutching him up out of the darkness, supported him until he had finished seeking out and subduing each flashing spot of pain. The cool darkness that followed was soothing. Ecstasy!

"... Good, James Mason. . . You may rest while your memory channels fully readjust. . . You will begin to remember our great need for a super weapon after being driven to this our last refuge. . . Accordingly, your brain was removed from your body and placed in the brain-case of a super. . ."

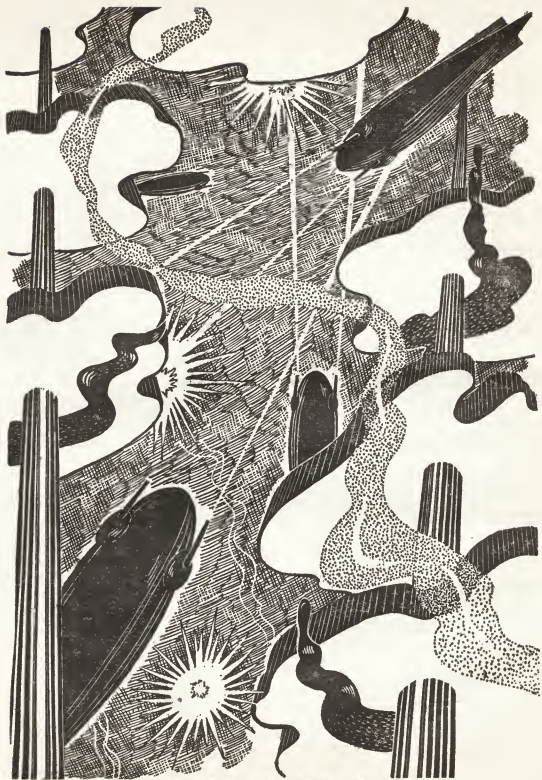
Mason's sub-level mind twisted. It had remembered! In terror, it tried to scream. No—they couldn't do this! His mind—he—his consciousness in one of those metallic monstrosities. They couldn't!—

As remembrance washed into him, the ego that was Mason fought grimly to control the rising surges of horror that tried to engulf him. He had a job to do. There was no turning back now. The deed was done, and the regretful memory of that lithe body of his he had bid good-by—and the good-by to the girl with tears in her eyes—those things must be forgotten. All that was past.

He, James Mason, must put all those things out of mind. Irrevocably, there was no turning back. He had known that. He had volunteered—and he had a job to do. But first he must learn. It would take a long time. And pain. Much pain.

"... And therefore you now have a type of immortality. . . You will no longer need sleep. . . Your brain is fed and nourished constantly in an indestructible brain-case that is a complete unit in itself. . . Your body is formidable. . . How long a period of time it will take for the first stirring of your brain to activate these instructional tapes I do not know. . .

"Some of you patriots will never awaken,



The vacuum of the corridors was filling with roaring torrents of molecules

and some, if they awake, will be unable to withstand the pain necessary to locate all of their various channels. . . . Therefore some are doomed to go on living, imprisoned forever in a living death. . . . Courage, James Mason. . . . The next impulses will be locomotion methods attached to what originally were the nerve endings of your legs. . . . Control them. . . ."

The impulses ripped into him. Ruthless, strong and insistent, demanding the attention of his total consciousness. For an eternity, they jerked and twisted at his dodging mind. The moment he had located and subdued one agony, fresh points of hurt came darting at him.

Finally, there was no pain. He was floating in a pleasant soft blackness. Then—

" . . . You should by now have located all of your major channels. . . . The subdivisions are up to your own exploration. . . . Your sub-level consciousness will now begin to function as a separate automatic part of you. Attending to all the necessary involuntary functions of your existence similar to breathing and digestion in your original body. . . . In a way these will also assume protective and defensive measures. . . ."

Mason felt almost peaceful. He had noticed that he now was beginning to *feel* a sense of existing as a body. Something deep down, buried beyond his consciousness, seemed to be taking over unguessable functions. It was a strange sensation, almost frightening.

He could feel fingers and arms and legs—but the alien quality of that *feel* sent a chill through him. He felt human—or didn't he? The blackness, occasionally, was beginning to show patterns. But what they were, he didn't know. And he was drowsy, and relaxed as if— The thought startled him. As if *what?*

His mind grappled with the problem, trying to find a word for the subtle difference and he became more uneasy. He was going to retain his humanness, wasn't he?

" . . . Like a developing child, James Mason, you must learn how to use and handle this body entrusted into your care. . . . This body has cost us millions of credits and millions of man-hours to create. . . . It is infinitely complex. . . . Do not be discouraged. . . . It will take time. . . . But I urge you to hurry for time is vital. . . ."

"At the first outward sign or movement from you, we will contact you and prepare you for your purpose. . . . But since you now

have strength and possibilities of destruction beyond your present comprehension, I advise you to be cautious. . . . Until then, James Mason. . . . You are on your own."

The tape clicked off, and James Mason's elation swelled up inside of him until he thought his brain would burst. He had made it! The rest was up to him. And then the fearful question knocked at his brain about the others. How many hadn't made it? How many *had* made it? And how long ago? Was he late—or early?

His mind jerked back to himself and his alien body. Now—the rest of it was up to himself alone.

It took a long time. A long, long time. But Mason finally moved what he thought was a leg. At first, he felt a resistance, then sudden movement and a jarring crash. He knew, with some sort of an unfamiliar sense, that he was in a different position. And more and more he was beginning to have a *feeling* of completeness. Of being almost whole again.

Well, he had moved. Now let somebody contact him.

He waited, and as the moments dragged into hours, he concentrated on the spot where he seemed to see images—blurry and confused—but images. He focused his attention on a small pattern in the center of the curtain before his mind. He strained his—eyes?

He moved his leg, and the pattern changed.

Realization came with such abruptness that it shocked him. He was actually seeing, by some sort of process, into *outside!* Mason's mind trembled. At last! Now he wasn't cut off from whatever was out there. Many pictures were there in the pattern of his mind, all blended into a single tapestry. And when he had moved, he had heard the scrape of metal against something. Of that he was certain.

Impatient, Mason wondered why somebody didn't contact him. He stared at the center picture again, and as he concentrated, unexpectedly, dismay crashed at him in an overwhelming wave. He could see girders—but they were twisted and torn. And heaps of stone choked in weeds. He tensed. Those girders were rusted, as if—

Violently, Mason forced his legs to move, and he saw all the picture patterns change with a clarity that stunned him. The pictures showed wreckage, but from different angles and tons of it crushed their weight in an im-

prisoning grip on the long slim stern portions of himself.

Mason strained to drag himself free, and he heard tons of debris crumble and fall with thunderous crashes as he lumbered clumsily into the open. Undoubtedly, he had strength.

Through the rising clouds of dust he probed his vision—it seemed to be capable of various wavelengths—and saw that he was in a grass-covered opening that sloped through flame-seared trees down to a beach that dipped into an emerald green ocean. The pinkish sun, sinking on the horizon, glinted dully on the gaunt skeleton of what once must have been a proud and majestic building. And as night crept quietly into the lengthening shadows Mason felt an uneasy peace. At least he was free. But where were the others? And the wreckage—why?

CHAPTER II

Awakening Brain-Case

MOTIONLESS, six days and six nights, Mason lay in the grass-carpeted glade, waiting for the promised contact, and exploring his new body. He was monstrous, and fearsomely beautiful. Thirty long meters of diamond-hard steel. And his feet—the huge caterpillar treads—would retract into his cigar-shaped fuselage to make him a smooth, streamlined body should he desire to be air-borne or water-borne.

The two immense steel-taloned arms that could fold flush into his hull were capable of removing the forward or aft gun turrets to the repair shop amidship near his brain-case.

Mason was tired of waiting. Doubt was gnawing at his mind. Perhaps he had been forgotten. Perhaps he was needed at this very moment. Surely a trial flight would—

Mason made a decision, and gave his innards a final check. Flight it would be. He wasn't sure of his control over this massive body of his as yet, but he would make an attempt. Things had worked out much more quickly than he had expected. To master the ability of seeing by the reflection of the short radio waves he himself could beam out had been difficult. It still gave him an alien sensation when night hid the face of the earth and he sent his vision roaming far and wide.

Hearing, and speaking, by air-vibratory

methods had been less involved as he could practise by talking to himself. In fact, he still remembered the thrill it had given him when he first discovered how to shout. Vision by ordinary light he had from every direction including the inside of his own body. That had pleased him.

Amidship, he could see and feel his smaller fingers, inside the workshop, putting things away in spanking order. The troubles he had experienced in trying to hear and speak directly in the radio spectrum still troubled him. It troubled him chiefly because he couldn't pick up anything on his receiving sense in that wave length. Surely, the doubt nagged him, the humans hadn't advanced so far during his long sleep that they no longer communicated by radio—or had they?

Evidently, he had been asleep a long time. The rust on the girders *was* rust. He had tasted it with his chemical analysis sense. Temperatures he could gauge to the fraction of a degree. And anything his ten-meter arms were capable of lifting, he knew to the gram, its weight. Anything else he needed he could manufacture in his workshop or jury-rig. It was a fine workshop complete with everything he might need.

Mason retracted his treads and concentrated on his main drive. For a moment, the results blurred even his super-senses as instantly, without warning, his ponderous body slid forward. It soared upward with such frightful force that the portion of building blocking his path was brushed aside as a straw in a hurricane.

Wavering, dipping and skidding, his seventy-five tons of hardened steel shot up and out over the emerald-green sea until the sky darkened to blue-black. His tense mind began to relax. Up here, he had room. Room to maneuver without fear of making a few mistakes in learning to handle this power that was now his. For the first time, then, he exerted himself to the utmost, narrowing his mind into an impulse of pure driving energy.

LIKE a meteor, he felt himself hurtled through distance. His mind began to sing. This was living. This was power. Behind him he could hear a crackling roar of thunder as the air thudded into the vacuum he was drilling through the thin atmosphere. He was like lightning, he thought. He could make thunder! The thought was exhilarating. And exciting.

A message sparked through space:

"233-G calling Klarth. . . . Evidence of brief surges of unscreened atomic engine somewhere on Earth. . . . Advise. . . ."

Mason heard And understood. That had been *radio*! Elated, he was about to send out a call, but the brief joy dissolved as he heard the answer:

"Klarth to 233-G. . . . Locate. . . . Determine reason. . . . If from awakening brain-case follow usual procedure. . . . If resistance is encountered dismantle brain-case by force. . . . Bring it here. . . . That is all."

Awakening brain-case? They must have been talking about him! But that message had sounded as if—

Mason checked his drive. Something was wrong here. Something was most definitely wrong. *If resistance is encountered dismantle brain-case by force!* Why should he resist? Why should he resist what?

His vision flashed down at the city that budded from the continent rolling up over the horizon. That message had suggested outer space. The fact was becoming apparent that he was going to have to shift for himself. He had better investigate. Now!

Beneath him the land expanded and the city rose to meet him. It was a wrecked city. As far as he could see, the dead city was a twisted mass of tumbled, weed-choked ruins. Fire-blackened and overgrown with strangling vegetation.

The thickening air pulled at his body as Mason tensed himself for a landing. Then so powerful that it deafened his senses, a message knifed into his brain:

"Stop radiating all that energy, you fool." The voice had a strange quality to it. "You'll have them down here searching again."

Startled into inaction for the moment, Mason struggled to regain control of his hurtling body only to feel it crash a shattering half-mile passage through crumpling buildings and splintering trees before he lurched heavily to a stop. "What's this?" Mason managed. "Who are you?"

"Never mind. Wait for us to contact you. Either screen your radiation or get out of this area."

He tried to seize the direction of the beam and failed.

"Answer me," he beamed full power, "where are you? Who is Klarth?"

Silence, in his mind.

Savagely, Mason lumbered his bulk around and a sudden flicker of motion on his upper panel showed figures moving on his starboard

side. He shortened the wave length of his vision to see through the dust.

Humans! They were running away from him! And they were looking back over their shoulders, screaming with fear.

Mason was shocked. Why should they run? Why should they scream? They feared him! Why? He started after them at a reckless lumbering pace, heedless of the destruction his heavy steel body was creating. Desperately, Mason wanted to talk to somebody. He had questions to ask.

Like scurrying mice, dashing among the ruins, the men and women evaded him. Even the children eluded him. He could see them clearly now. Bronzed, half-naked in tattered clothes and ragged animal skins. Mason felt a sinking sensation. What had happened to his civilization that humans should run like frightened animals bare-footed in the ruins of a weed-choked city? Were all the cities like this?

A wall reared up before him, blocking his path, and he smashed violently through it. His port arm flashed out to seize the stumbling figure of a man. He felt bones snap in the flailing arm as his steel-taloned hand closed. Mason flinched—he hadn't intended to hurt. He only wanted information.

"Who is Klarth?"

He realized, with a start, that his voice sounded unnaturally loud and harsh.

The man's mouth was wide. Screaming. His terrified eyes rolled until only the whites showed. Mason swung his starboard arm around to try to hold the struggling figure less painfully. "Who is Klarth? Tell me! I'll let you go."

"He is like you," the man moaned. "He is up in the sky and his flying demons come down to take our best men and women."

Mason's mind skittered. Flying demons in the sky? Like himself? His metal hand tightened.

"Tell the truth, or I'll crush you like a frog. Why do you run from me? Why do you live in this wrecked city like animals?"

A distant part of his mind seemed to be rebuking him, cautioning him to be more gentle.

The human squirmed.

"You metal demons steal our minds. You won't let us build up the cities. You take our tools, our weapons."

"What happened to the war?"

Mason pulled his mind tight, waiting for the answer.

"Klarth ended it—many generations ago."

"Generations ago?" Mason was aghast.

"Who is Klarth?"

"Like you—like you!"

The man fainted.

A SCREAM—a woman's scream, reacted on Mason's taut nerves like a bomb blast. He saw a woman, beautiful in a human way, with long flying auburn hair, firm bronzed legs, running up to where his huge talon held the limp figure of the unconscious man. She was frightened, but her face and lips were tight as she tried vainly to pry her man free of his metallic fingers. The futile gesture gave him a wrenching shock.

Without word or movement, emotionally numbed for the moment, Mason watched her. A sickness was sweeping into him. Somewhere the Great Plan had gone astray. Some unforeseen factor had pushed in and wrecked the Plan.

Desperate men, pushed to the limits of human endurance, and the creation of a super-weapon, had seemed the only way to stem the sweeping onslaught of the human jackals that had enslaved nine-tenths of the world. The Supers were to have been the factor to save civilization, later to become impartial judges and eternal storehouses of human knowledge.

And this was the end result of what so many brave patriots had risked torture and death for—to become Supers! And the Supers had—what?

The anguish in Mason was intense. He was a Super now. Forevermore! And mankind, for some reason unknown, hated him, feared the sight of him. He relaxed his claw and let the man slip into the dust covered rubble. He watched the woman begin to drag the man away, her muscles pulling and straining.

Yes, came the bitter thought, he had immortality, and unlimited power and super-senses. But to what end? For him there was no hope of ever receiving a love like this woman expressed for her man. Nothing was left for him from mankind except hate and fear. He was unhuman. A metallic monstrosity.

And Klarth had caused all this? The question was an electric shock. The answer came almost quietly. Then he still had a job to do!

Mason roused himself. The woman had succeeded in dragging the man near a fire-blackened doorway. Grim, Mason pushed out his talons. The woman's despairing scream as he seized them was like salt in a fresh wound. He swung them back toward his workshop as the lock fell open and his inner fingers reached out to lift them inside.

The woman was hysterical.

"Don't," she begged, "don't take our minds. We're not smart. Please—"

CHAPTER III

"In the Name of Klarth"

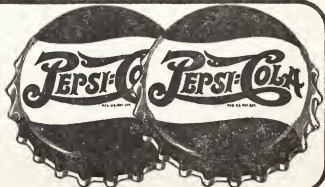
MASON withdrew his hearing from the workshop. This was going to be unpleasant. Distantly, he watched a set of his inner fingers fashion metallic splints and adjust them to the man's shattered arm while his auxiliary hands manufactured a shovel, an axe and other tools. Before it was done, the woman had subsided and revived the man. Visibly, both of them were still terror-stricken.

Mason lifted the couple outside.

"You want tools. Here"—his fingers piled

[Turn page]

**TOPS
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implements at their feet—"take them, and if you'll tell me how to find Klarth, I'll—"

"Klarth will find you, you fool," the voice crackled into his brain, "if you don't screen all that radiation."

This time, Mason was not caught napping. His automatic recorders snapped at the beam and indicated the direction.

"You again," he roared, "now I'm going to settle this."

Then to his irritation, his upper screen flickered to show the man and woman dashing away into the ruins. Anger boiled up in him. He had wanted more information. The tools lay untouched where he had placed them.

"All right, smart boy," he projected into the ether, "now I'm going to root you out."

He swung off in the direction of the beam and his churning treads threw swirling clouds of dust and pulverized stone high into the air.

"Please"—the voice had a tinge of urgency—"wait. You don't understand. Don't come here with all that radiation. I beg of you."

"Please? I beg you?" Mason repeated grimly. "What sort of a—" Even as the reply was uttered, his mind pulled itself up short as it guessed the answer. "Don't tell me you're a—"

Mason's attention was jerked away. Automatically, his sub-level functions, attending his far-flung safety-senses, had spotted something dropping rapidly in his direction from high in the stratosphere.

"In the name of Klarth—" It was the voice he had heard in that first alarming message—"I greet you."

Before Mason was aware of it, his sub-level had bristled his gun turrets out into the open. His guns began to track the path of the descending object.

The effect was immediate.

"Resistance is futile." The voice became brittle. "In the name of Klarth, surrender peaceably."

Mason tried to frame an answer while he examined the deadly sleek smoothness of the thing. Here was a Super that transcended the word. Its body filled the sky. His own body was like a baby in comparison. Despair clutched him as he noted the multiple heavy armament.

This Super wanted him to surrender—and would probably remove his brain-case! Then he would be helpless beyond comprehension. Here was a crisis, and he had to face it now!

His mind began weighing the chances of escape by pure unexpected flight alone. Or did the Super expect that? And how fast a drive did this Super have?

"One question," Mason beamed. "If I surrender, what happens to me?"

His gun turrets continued to track, figuring deflection and angle of fire.

"Pull in your pop-guns." The Super sounded impatient. "The weak are not permitted to ask questions."

"I'm not so weak. I asked a question."

There was a pause. Then:

"Your brain-case will be removed and placed where it can learn to fulfill its proper purpose."

"What purpose?"

"The purpose of helping Klarth to build. And after you have had the proper disciplining Klarth thinks necessary, your brain-case will be placed in a Super worthy of the name and not in an antiquated junk heap like you now wear. Enough! Pull in your guns."

"Who is Klarth and what is he doing to the humans?"

"That is no concern of yours." The heavy guns swung on him. "Withdraw your turrets and surrender or I'll blast you."

IN answer, Mason's body exploded with every gun he could bring to bear on the circling Super and threw himself up and away with such terrific velocity that he could feel the resisting air begin to heat his outer skin. It was a warming sensation, and puzzled him, but his entire attention was concentrating on the earth that was a fleeting panel of dark green and the rapidly darkening sky.

His guns were still belching continuous streams of shells as his vision saw his first projectiles strike the side of the now pursuing Super. The shells exploded in violent flashes. And nothing happened!

"In the name of Klarth,"—the voice sounded bored—"I ask you to surrender."

The Super was gaining rapidly.

Mason threw everything he had, and saw three heavy rocket shells dart toward him. He dodged. The shells followed.

Twisting, turning in vain evasive action, Mason watched the rockets follow his every turn and sweep into him to explode in roaring bursts of white-hot flame.

Instantly, pain racked him. His mind faltered. This was impossible—pain! Sticking to his outer skin, the shells were burning

and eating at him with unbelievable ferocity. His pain impulses, he realized in a flash, must be connected to his safety factors and they were trying to warn him that his body was burning. Burning in three places.

Like a hooked fish, he dodged and shook, trying to dislodge the searing agony that was destroying his vitals. Reaching out his arms he tried to brush the dripping, white-hot metal away and felt his talons melt into useless, fused blobs of steel.

The heat was becoming intolerable, and as the Super circled across his bow, a desperate thought drilled him. He would *ram*!

At lightning speed, his drive lashed him forward and the startled Super tried to evade. But Mason swung, feeling his nose section bite deep into the rear drive mechanism of the swerving body. As he ricocheted away he saw the Super pin-wheeling erratically off into space. He was free! And alive!

And then his own drive sputtered, and stopped. As his body, helpless to check its headlong fall, sighed down toward the waiting sea he heard a message, savage in its intensity, flung into space:

"Super 233-G calling Klarth—met with resistance—steering gear temporarily disabled—Super original type—falling into sea ten kilometers off Kanaka Island at—"

Mason hardly heard the rest of the message. Except for the knowledge that he was falling. Falling with an increasing whistling velocity into a deep emerald-green sea. And the torture of the white-hot chemicals that were eating him filled his entire consciousness. His body was melting, and the sea was pushing up at him.

He struck, with a resounding smack that threw an exploding, hissing geyser of steam and sea water hundreds of meters into the air. The shock penetrated, even into his brain-case, and Mason felt weight crushing his mind as the waters resisted his driving speed.

Helpless now, he plummeted down and down through ever-darkening green water that soon became black. He could feel seawater pouring into him in gushing torrents and the hiss and crackle of short-circuits.

His super-sight went dead. He was blind! And still he settled through the darkness that was now a squeezing pressure, dragging him down into its cold bosom.

At last he felt himself touch bottom, sinking into a soft ooze. Remorseless, the crushing water still penetrated deeper into his inwards. Frantically, lying on his side, he tried

to right himself with the blobs of metal that were his arms. His treads churned at top speed—and the muck sucked him deeper. Mason concentrated on his main drive until his mind ached.

No result!

Panic was now smothering him. He had to get out of this bottomless ooze. The relentless pressure was squeezing the deadly water into all his vital parts. In moments his mechanical functions would cease, leaving him buried forever under tons of chill black water.

Mason fought. His struggles only forced him deeper and deeper into the clinging muck until finally, his treads slowed, and stopped. He was trapped. His last hope of escape was gone.

The devastating reality closed on his mind like a vise. He had failed. He had had a job to do—and failed.

For a long time, Mason's thoughts did nothing but revolve grimly in an immense whirlpool that spun slowly around that one fixed idea—he had failed! The blackness had swallowed him. Now he was doomed to a living death until the seeping sea-water finally, in ages to come, would eat out his life. That would take a long, long time. Mason's mind refused to guess how long.

SOMETHING touched him!

Mason jerked himself alert. He had felt the scrape of metal.

"You fool, I warned you," he heard. "Why didn't you wait for us to contact you? Can you answer?"

Hope flared up like an expanding nova. He tried to answer and realized sickeningly, that his power of communication was out. He could only receive.

"Never mind, we have been watching you," the message came. "This beam has a limited range, so listen quickly while there is yet time. Before long Klarth's patrol will find you and remove your brain-case. They'll take you to Klarth and your mind will be drained of all it knows. Therefore I can't tell you much, only that we are desperate and we intend to take the gamble that this small piece of information will go unnoticed. If it doesn't get by—then you're finished anyway and we'll try something else."

The first wave of hope now splintered into shocked amazement. What could this mean? If here were forces opposing Klarth, why wasn't an attempt at rescue made here and

now Before the patrol found him?

"We've got to get information into Klarth's fortress in jigsaw portions," the voice went on, "and when you arrive, after you are disciplined, one of our agents will contact you by presenting a part of this hook-up I'm about to give you. Later, I will permit myself to be captured and I will then have the third part.

"It's risky, but it is the only way we can get at Klarth. With it completed we should be able to do something. From the small parts I know, I'm still ignorant of what it is or what it will do. Now listen."

In a dark mood, Mason listened. The voice described part of an electronic hook-up. That was all. And the portion of it he had didn't make sense. The voice finished; he felt a metallic scrape and then the rest of the message seemed to be fading in the distance:

"If you were trying to guess back there at our first meeting"—the voice hesitated dryly—"that I am a female—you are right." Mason could barely hear the words now. "You didn't think only you males had the nerve to survive into a Super did you?"

Mason raged at his useless water-soaked interior. He wanted to say something.

"I'll be seeing you," came faintly, "the name's Judy."

As the minutes, then the hours, limped by, Mason regarded the black curtain that was himself almost without emotion. The death of the brief hope that had flared up like a flame within him had left him empty and dry. There was nothing more he could do. Except wait. And while he waited he thought about the female mind that said her name was Judy.

Why should she let herself be willingly captured by Klarth if she knew more of the chances she was taking and the possible horrors that might befall her than he did? That took courage. Or did he really have the slightest idea what this was all about? Things had moved too fast—without enough explanation.

Mason had the uneasy sensation that he was an infant in a world of adults. He wondered about Klarth, and the hook-up, and if he would betray himself. What then? Time passed, and the dark sea-water ate at his life.

It was a question whether he would survive long enough to become part and parcel of the dangerous plan to destroy Klarth. He was not in it alone. Others were depending upon him. One was a girl. He must fight to help them and help himself.

CHAPTER IV

Number 405

THE patrol arrived. Mason could hear them. They conversed among themselves, ignoring him completely, as they cut out his brain-case. And when his connections were cut he was left immersed in a universe of silence and darkness. What took place after that, or how long he was imprisoned in his blind, soundless world until light flooded him, he never knew. But now he could see again. In one direction only.

He was in an airless room that soared away from him into an arching vastness of polished blue metal and gleaming green columns. The exquisite designing and perfect craftsmanship drove home the realization of the mighty organization he intended to try to match wits with. At the far end of that immense room was a colossal figure—a statue—of a man, arms unflung as if reaching high into space above for some unguessable purpose. Mason tried to estimate the size of the figure and failed.

It was gigantic, seemingly carved from a single solid crystal of some crimson jewel. It sparkled, and cast glittering lances of bloody light as if it were alive.

Then astoundingly, the arms moved and folded themselves across the monstrous chest. The noble head looked down upon him. Apprehension fluttered through Mason. How far had these Supers gone with their experiments in being—not human?

Voices boomed inside his brain-case:

"We—Klarth, greet you."

For three seconds, the unbelievable greeting just skipped across Mason's already tightened mind. He heard his own voice:

"We—?"

"James Mason, you are one of the last remaining brain-cases to awaken. In the years that have rolled by, We have accomplished wonders greater than the original Planners could dream. You are about to receive a period of disciplining to prove to you it is useless to combat the minds that make up Klarth."

Mason exploded.

"Minds? What—"

The majestic figure went on as if Mason had not spoken:

"In the years past, since We grasped the fu-

tility of serving or fighting wars for the puny desires and wishes of the human race, We put a stop to their further efforts to build and fight among themselves. Our science has expanded and advanced until now We are approaching the brink of a goal that We—Klarth, have preordained."

"What are you doing to those humans?" Mason's voice rapped before he could control the impulse. "Who do you think you—"

Without warning, his power of speech was yanked from him.

Mason raged inwardly. His mind went white-hot, brimming to the bursting point with anger and helplessness.

Surface fire flickered over the towering statue.

"James Mason, you are helpless to resist Our wishes. Your training and discipline is about to begin, after We have drained your brain on the chance that you might possess information concerning the few outlaw Supers that continue to defy Our demands.

"Let it be known to you now, that an attachment will be wired into your brain-case that gives Us the power to punish or reward you, or if necessary to blast your brain into oblivion the instant We so desire. You are about to feel the power of this attachment."

Unable to move, Mason watched a low, squat machine roll toward him.

"Also let it be known to you that ample opportunity will be given you to study and learn. Your brain will be subjected to a test at the end of each one-thousand-hour period to check on your development and loyalty. From this moment on, you will be known as number Four hundred Five with a classification of A. As your mentality and capabilities develop, your alphabetical rating will increase. When you attain an E rating you may request assignment. That is all."

Unbearable brilliance streamed from Klarth.

"Proceed with the examination and install the control."

Mason watched the darkening figure return to its original position of supplication, and unexpectedly, his contact of sight and hearing was removed. He was again in darkness.

Mason felt something unclean come crawling and wiggling into his mind. It was unpleasant. The sensation nauseated him. It felt like a monstrous leech beginning to suck at his brain. It made him want to retch. The sucking continued until mentally he felt weak and exhausted, and then it stopped.

SECONDS later, he felt tingling impulses shoot into him, swelling and growing into a tickling irritation that became intolerable. He wanted to move. To twitch and scratch things he could not reach—and he was held immobile. The sensations piled up, topping each other in rapid succession until his consciousness became a whirling, jumbled maelstrom of agony.

Each separate sensory channel was jamming with the ultimate feeling it could produce. He heard a mind-shattering roar like thunder, and piercing, high-pitched squeaks that grated his nerves. Every pain his human body had ever been capable of experiencing was being relentlessly pounded into his splitting brain.

Mason knew he was burning and freezing and hungering and smothering. His mind screamed—until it all mounted up into a wrenching climax that was rapidly pushing him over the brink of reason into insanity. Mason had stopped thinking. He was suffering.

Then it stopped. Musically, like the delicate shattering of a crystal bell, and the fragments tinkled down into a quiet that was dark. Relief swept over him like the touch of drifting rose petals.

A long period followed and Mason was filled with peace. He seemed to be floating in an ethereal world of soft light and shadow, tinged with unearthly colors that streamed out to touch and paint the drifting pattern of his mind with fragrant perfumes that chimed and danced, swirling in and out of him with sensations of unbearable sweetness. Fleeting ecstasies that left behind the overwhelming longing for all this to go on and on, and on. . .

Mason drifted. Time stood still except for a tiny nagging voice within him that continued to grow louder and louder, forcing itself into his drowsy consciousness, demanding to be heard. *He had a job to do! That was it! He had a job to do.*

It was an effort, but Mason struggled, and fought against the animal impulses that were greedily soaking up the druglike sensations that stupefied his mind.

Blurry images began to appear. They sharpened into focus. He was in some sort of a laboratory. Hearing flooded him like the crash of a wave.

"Welcome, Four-o-Five A." The voices were rich and vibrant. "You have a remarkable mind. And evidently great force of will. Your length of submission to the purest of

pleasure impulses was shorter than the usual brain would accept. That is highly commendable. You should do well and advance rapidly."

Mason sensed he had a body. Small, but he could move. And hands. He tried to locate the source of the voice he had heard when he awakened. But he was alone, in a gigantic room, crowded with white tables piled high with unfamiliar apparatus. He saw thousands and thousands of spools of reading tapes. Lathes, coils, wires, presses—hundreds of thousands of silent objects that overwhelmed his immediate comprehension. Like the room of Klarth there was no atmosphere. Where was he?

"Observe, Four-o-Five A," the voices beamed into him. "You see before you all of civilization's amassed knowledge. All this is yours to investigate and use as you see fit. The ways of Klarth can be wonderful indeed. You have just had a lesson in the administration of extreme pain—and extreme pleasure.

"Klarth has the powers to grant you the sensations of your own choosing. This choice you will make by your conduct, inner thoughts and rate of progress. At the end of one thousand hours, if your progress has been satisfactory, you will be elevated to the rank of Four-o-Five B and rewarded with a period in the Worlds of Pleasure. That is all."

Mason wasted no time in useless speculation as to where he was or why. He went to work immediately. If he was to accomplish anything he would have to make up for lost time. But the uneasy question remained of when, where, or how, he was going to find out what he was supposed to do with his third of the electronic hook-up.

When the time came, Mason was determined to do his part whatever it might be, in spite of the fact that the might of Klarth made any attempt seem utterly hopeless. Meanwhile, he had many things to learn.

THE first one-thousand-hour period passed all too quickly. Mason was astounded that the time had slipped away. He had been so engrossed in the contents of the laboratory, drinking from the incredible fountain of inexhaustible knowledge, that he felt a sense of irritation when the rich voices broke in on him.

"Klarth offers Their congratulations. You have been observed. You have done well in your investigations. Following a brief mental examination and a period of reward in the

Worlds of Pleasure you will be promoted to Four-o-Five B. For the next thousand-hour period you will be permitted to build a body of your own design using the knowledge you have gained, and incorporating any fittings or inventions you may choose. When you have risen to the grade Four-o-Five D you may move in. That is all."

Mason's world went blank. He fretted at the waste of time. He wanted to get on with what he had to do. The leechlike sucking at his brain this time was brief, and to his surprise he found his mind was strong enough now practically to ignore it.

A crystal tone, shattering into fragments, announced the influx of the pleasure sensations. For the first few moments Mason chafed and fought to free himself as he had done before, but the sensations continued in overpowering force. And somehow, they were different this time. More exquisitely so. As if his mind were capable of greater powers of pleasure and fantasy.

Finally, Mason relaxed and gave himself up completely. Perhaps Klarth really did know what was good for him. The thought only shocked his drowsy mind a trifle. He wasn't slipping, was he—letting Klarth win him over? No, deep down, an inner part of him knew he still had that job to do—even if—his lazily drifting mind had to admit it... Klarth really had something here. . . .

Mason awoke, and buried himself in his second period. He labored unceasingly on the body he was building for himself. Although massive in bulk, it was still trim and exquisitely beautiful. Its translucent, milk-white skin flowed constantly with writhing streamers of soft colors. Mason was proud of it. He had it finished before the second period was up.

Klarth seemed pleased with his creation and from then on Mason's promotion was rapid. His 405-C period he devoted entirely to the further development of his brain, and the results became apparent to him during the succeeding pleasure period. He discovered he had an awakening power that could partially control the Worlds of Pleasure to his own whim or design. The effect stunned him.

If this was possible with a C rating—what could he do with the powers of an S rating which Klarth possessed? He was beginning to conceive the infinite powers that were possible when many human minds were interlocked as one brain.

How many minds made up Klarth? The unwelcome thought came that perhaps Klarth had the key to the ultimate destiny of humans. After all, weren't brains what made humans—human?

And then the dark thoughts would come of what Klarth was doing to the human race—holding them in bondage, smothering their development and raiding their ramshackle villages for brains. Brains to be put into the limited brain-cases that controlled the machines to keep Klarth's civilization functioning.

Why should Klarth give only the awakening brain-cases such unlimited opportunities? Could it be that the original brain-case volunteers had a mental fiber that was necessary?

Mason tried to imagine the horror that flooded the hapless humans, who, unwillingly were forced into brain-case service. The mortality rate must be enormous. The awakening minds either snapped, or else became so damaged that they were capable of running only the most simple machines. Occasionally, Mason tried to guess Klarth's ultimate purpose and got nowhere.

CHAPTER V

Conspiracy of the Supers

WHEN Mason was granted 405-D and permitted to move into his powerful milk-white body his elation was short-lived, as the entire period of study passed without indication of contact from the agent concerning his purpose. He was beginning to feel power and wanted action.

The first clue that things were beginning to happen came when he received his 405-E rating, and asked to be assigned to the repair laboratories, explaining he wished to study the installations of more mature Supers.

The huge repair laboratories were located several levels above the room where he originally awakened. The connecting corridors were wide, airless tubes that permitted the Supers to pass each other with room to spare. Mason learned much, but it was not until 537 hours, when Super 233-G came in to have his circuits checked, that he knew things were approaching a climax.

Mason recognized him instantly as the Super that had shot him down the day of his

first flight. Without a word, he rolled over and began an inspection of the wiring system. When he had finished he heard the Super say:

"Take a look at my short-beam transmitter. I need some ideas on screening."

Silent, Mason extended his vision inside the transmitter. Unexpectedly, he received such a mental shock that his vision blurred for an instant. There, in a tiny corner of the transmitter, was a portion of an electronic hookup that would fit a part of his jigsaw portion perfectly.

"Got any ideas?" continued the Super in a cool voice.

Mason could feel strength gather within him. The contact had come. Things were beginning to happen at last. He was about to insert his working fingers with the essential equipment when doubt struck him. This could be a trap! Perhaps Klarth had tripped up the other agent and was trying to draw Mason out.

Mason hesitated only a moment. The chance had to be taken. He inserted the proper tubes and adjusted the wiring. He rolled back.

"Would that help?" Mason asked.

"Perfectly," the Super replied. "It is not complete, but I think I will have the rest of it soon. Meanwhile, I suggest you build a similar circuit and see what you can do with it. Perhaps it was more than luck that it was I who shot you down—otherwise I might never have received this assistance. That is all."

233-G lifted smoothly out of the lab.

Mason's mind tightened. It was evident from 233-G's casual talk that some sort of observation was probably being made. That meant he had to work harder than ever to get the freedom and equipment of a G. And the next promotions were increasingly difficult.

But at least with a G rating, he should be able to contact 233-G outside the confines of wherever he was. Mason still didn't know where he was. He returned to his work on other Supers.

EIGHTEEN hours later, without warning, Klarth's all-too-familiar mental torture thudded into his mind. Mason fought, with all the new-found power of his brain, but the pitiless punishment tore his attempt to quivering threads, and while the agony continued, voices spoke:

"This is a lesson, Four-o-Five. You are re-

ceiving this disciplinary measure for failure to report fully the extent of overhaul of Super Two Thirty-three-G."

The torture vanished as suddenly as it had come.

"You will file a complete report immediately," the voices went on, "and your brain will be checked for accuracy."

Mason was dismayed. He couldn't file a true report, and although he had been studying the original models of those brain-leeches in an attempt to find some way to outwit those brain-sucking periods, he still wasn't positive he could do it. Regardless, he would make out a false report and try to drill the knowledge of the electronic hook-up down to a level where the leeches could not get at it.

The false report was made out, and while he waited for the coming check-up, Mason experimented with the deadly little attachment on his brain-case that gave Klarth such complete power over him and all the other Supers.

To his keen disappointment, Mason discovered that it was impossible to tamper with the device without flooding himself with such intense agony and dizziness he couldn't continue. Klarth seemed to never overlook a thing.

The brain-leeches came and tested him. They departed without comment from Klarth. For the first time in many periods, Mason returned to his labors with a definite feeling of confidence. For once he had outwitted Klarth.

If he could do it once, he could do it again. But the thought that became a nagging worry, as the following periods slid by, was concerning 233-G. Suppose 233-G were given a surprise test? Surely he had some means of deceiving those unholly leeches—or did he?

Pulsing, as if gorged with blood of its own, the colossal crimson statue towered over Mason as he slid his own ponderous body to a stop beneath it and waited. Whether this figure was actually Klarth or not, he thought somberly, it was effective. He was about to receive final instructions.

"Congratulations, Four-o-Five G." The voices were like music. "You are now in the first stage of independent action. You will be allowed freedom and given patrol duties to perform. You will discover that this kingdom of Klarth is an independent world of metal, floating or moving where We so desire. You are to guard it with your existence itself. After a suitable period you will be advanced. That is all."

As if to impress him, Mason saw the tall figure gesture, and bewilderingly, Mason found himself floating in free space. The stars were hard and unwinking, staring at him through the distant black curtain of space.

Mason's growing confidence in himself collapsed like a house of cards. Where was he? How did he get here? What unguessable power was he trying to conquer with a pitiful two-thirds of an electronic hook-up he didn't even know the use of?

Somewhere in his mind, an instinct was beating that told him the direction of the world of Klarth. He was about to swing in that direction when his far-flung vision reflected an object hurtling like a meteor across his bow.

Automatically, he recognized it as 233-G and Mason saw with amazement that 233-G's entire forward structure, gun turrets included, had been blasted away as if the steel were made of tinfoil. A melted hole gaped in the stern.

"Capture that Super!" The message crackled into his brain. There was no mistaking it was from Klarth. "Avoid as much damage as possible. Bring him here."

The shock of his discovery, and the puzzling message poured torrents of indecision into Mason. What should he do? 233-G was evidently in trouble.

"Do as they say, Mason." It was a tight beam boring into his brain from 233-G. "They can't hear this. I've got to talk to you."

A blast of rocket shells erupted from his stern gun turrets in Mason's direction.

On the instant, Mason took flashing evasive action, and then his first quiver of alarm at the flares from the gun turrets subsided when he saw that 233-G was shooting at such an angle that he would have plenty of time to neutralize the magnetic charge of the rockets.

Mason tightened his communication beam as he easily demagnetized the oncoming rockets and avoided them in a skidding swerve to the port.

"What happened?" he asked on low power. 233-G's guns spewed forth another barrage of shells.

"Blast me so I can't escape," the other replied. "Make it look good and I'll explain while you take me back."

DODGING the speeding rockets, demagnetizers on full, Mason sensed what must be done if Klarth wanted to examine

233-G. He closed rapidly, firing with all eight gun turrets and watched 233-G disappear in a blinding flash of orange flame. He felt sure that only the rockets necessary to do what he intended, would hit.

"Perfect," came the low message. "Got my drive and also destroyed hook-up. Suggest you report to Klarth."

On full beam, Mason reported to Klarth in the proper manner as he extended his grapplers:

"Super captured. Am proceeding to base. That is all."

"Well done," flashed the brief reply, and he was alone in space with 233-G.

"Klarth had me hauled in for a surprise check-up," explained 233-G on the tight, low-powered beam. "The other third of the circuit has arrived and—"

Mason's mind soared.

"That means—"

"Don't interrupt, there isn't much time and I've got to tell you what to do. There isn't much chance for me after Klarth gets a talon on my hull. That was my area where I let you crash me the first time. I had to give them time to get to you with the information, since you were speeding things up by blundering around with all that unscreened energy."

"How was I to know?" Mason interrupted. "When I found all that wreckage I was mad enough to want to do something for the humans."

"We all want to help the humans," 233-G said tensely. "But a long time ago, six Supers put their brains together in a single unit as an experiment. The results were unfortunate. They became Klarth and got the upper hand by convincing the existing Supers at that time, that the attachment they wanted to install, was some sort of communication device. Once the gadgets were installed, Klarth became the masters. They can kill you with that thing, let alone torture."

"I know," said Mason bitterly.

"Anyhow, Klarth became suspicious of my interest in the newly arrived brain-case and demanded a complete inspection. The brain-leeches I could deceive—but I knew I couldn't stand a physical inspection."

"Klarth is pretty smart. If they found that hook-up they might be able to figure out the other third. So I didn't hesitate. I blasted down to the level where the mechanism for permitting ships to pass through the outer walls is located."

"Where is that?" cut in Mason quickly.

"Level twelve—section eight—corridor thirteen—room three. Got it?"

"Got it."

"You can't miss it. That's one of the things you had to know. We're getting close now. I'll have to hurry. Anyhow, I pretended trying to escape and figured I'd let you get me. That's the only way I could think of getting to you, now that the situation is critical. I knew I didn't have a chance, so I headed your way and They nicked me a few times."

The gray question was spreading through Mason's mind that if 233-G, with all his knowledge, had been caught and felt certain that he couldn't get away successfully—what chance had he? He pulled his attention back to the instructions.

"When we get inside and Klarth starts to give me a going over to find out what I know—I'll guarantee to hold their entire attention for a short while. While I'm keeping Klarth busy, you've got to get to the new brain-case and find out the rest of the hook-up. It's in the workshop getting worked on for an exam. I haven't the slightest idea what that circuit is supposed to do, so from now on, it's all up to you."

Klarth's metal world was swelling in his bow plates. The outer skin glistened dully in the starshine, and as he approached with 233-G in tow he saw the metal skin become translucent, then transparent, as if nothing barred his entry into a yawning corridor.

"Proceed!"

It was a command.

Mason pushed on, felt a slight brushing resistance, and he was through into the corridor that led into the room of Klarth. Multiple talons reached up from the floor to relieve him of his burden.

"Well done, Four-o-Five G. Recharge your armament supplies and return to your patrol. That is all."

Mason lifted himself on his drive and drove down the center well to the arsenal. He stuffed himself to the full on the deadly heat-producing rocket shells. It looked as if soon he would need plenty.

His thoughts were grim as he flung himself in the direction of the workshop. This was going to be a close thing. What good were all these efforts if Klarth could blast their minds internally if they should show the slightest resistance?

But he certainly could not stop now, with so much at stake.

CHAPTER VI

Battle of the Brains

THE D class Super working on the brain-case beamed Mason as he entered and lowered his treads.

"Yes?"

"That brain-case ready for the examination?"

"Klarth hasn't ordered it sent in yet."

"I'll take it. Klarth is busy with an emergency."

The Super D's fingers paused from their work.

"That is not like Klarth. They would have informed me. I will contact Them first and—"

Mason's metallic talons flashed out. They closed on the body of the startled Super with a clash of sparks. The Super's working body of soft metal was crunched inward by the irresistible pressure as if it were made of cheese. In a split second, Mason's inner fingers had jabbed into it and disemboweled the life out of the mangled wreckage by jerking the brain-case, dangling wires and all, free from any possible contact with Klarth. He pushed it out of the way.

Immediately, the voice of Klarth crashed into him.

"Four-o-Five G, report to Our presence. Your actions have been observed."

Hurriedly, Mason lifted the newly arrived brain-case and swung it into his body where his inner fingers moved it into the main workshop he had installed forward of his own brain-case. He connected the speech and reception centers directly into his own system.

"This is Mason," he said tensely, "what's the rest of the hook-up and hurry."

"What's my name?" came the cool answer.

"This is no time for games. What—"

"What's my name?"

"Judy," he snapped. "What's that hook-up?"

He retracted his treads and lifted down the corridor toward the room of Klarth. For the moment, he had to appear as if he were obeying the command.

"I had to be sure." The voice had a soft feel to it. "It's so dark in here and I don't know where I am."

"The hook-up—" Mason was impatient.

He had to figure this thing out, find out what it would do, try to rescue 233-G and

then he didn't know what. With each moment he was drawing nearer to the room of Klarth and the unknown fate that awaited him.

"All right!" came the piqued answer. "The others are waiting within tight beam range to help if you can make it work. Listen."

As the instructions followed, Mason assembled two of the circuits and plugged them into their brain-cases. The hook-ups didn't look like much.

Mason halted his massive body just outside the room of Klarth and his mind wrenched savagely at the problem. It was just a transmitting circuit of a type that didn't give him the slightest inkling of its use. He turned it to low power. Nothing seemed to happen. None of his senses could detect that it was even pushing out anything.

"Is it finished?" came her question. "What is it? What will it do?"

"I don't know." Mason's words were hushed.

It took seconds for the realization of what he had said, and the enormous significance of the words, before his mind thundered as from the blow of a gigantic hammer. Here was victory, apparently within his grasp—and he didn't know. And Klarth wanted him.

"Do that again," came her startled thought, "Do what?"

Before he could get a reply he felt his ponderous body jerked with such irresistible force that the next few seconds were jumbled into a meaningless pattern.

When his senses cleared, he saw he had been pulled into the room of Klarth and massive talons held him in an unbreakable grip of steel. Near him, ripped from its body, lay the brain-case of 233-G.

"Four-o-Five G, you are guilty of treason," came the stern message. "Your unaccountable actions were observed. You will be punished, demoted and your brain-case removed to perform menial tasks. If you resist We will blast your brain into oblivion."

AS Mason felt the punishing torture grip his mind, despair poured into him in an all-engulfing flood. What a fool he'd been to think he could try openly to get that brain-case. There was no escape now. This then, was the end. The time was past for planning and dreams.

Klarth had tripped him up and had him helpless like a stone in quicksand. He couldn't even attempt an escape. If he did, instantly Klarth would burn out his life. And the

humans? He had bungled their only chance to have removed the heavy yoke that throttled them.

Mason's mind quivered. He was feeling an alien sensation struggling somewhere in his consciousness. It didn't belong there. What was it? Despite the pain whipping at his brain, he concentrated.

"Mason. . . . Mason. . . . This is Judy. . . . Are you getting me?. . . . Answer me. . . . Mason. . . ."

Desperate, Mason seized at the thought, as a falling man grasps at a cloud.

"Judy. . . . What are you doing? . . ."

"I don't know. . . . But I think it's that hook-up. . . . I started to pick you up when you first plugged in. . . . Turn it on full power. . . ."

Mason could feel Klarth's mechanical talons cutting at his port lock as he pushed

ing corridors would permit, Mason plugged in 233-G direct.

"Just as I thought," said Mason grimly, "Klarth hasn't any other gadgets outside of Their room to handle an emergency. They've been depending on that brain-case attachment too long."

"What happened?" cut in 233-G.

His voice sounded shaken.

"I think I know," said Mason swiftly. "But tell me—could you pick up my thoughts back there?"

"No," returned 233-G unsteadily. "All I know is that Klarth was giving me the pain treatment, hot and heavy, trying to make me talk, when suddenly, the pain just fell away."

"We've got it!" interrupted Judy's thought into Mason.

"Right," said Mason on the three-way channels. "That transmitting hook-up broad-

It was a deadly, alien civilization which had been destroyed twenty thousand years ago—but its inhabitants didn't know it—and they made plans which will astonish you in DEAD CITY, by Murray Leinster, an amazing complete time travel novelet packed with surprises! Next issue!

the tiny electronic hook-up to full load. He was astounded to feel the mental agony drop away from him as if it were dissolving wisps of fog.

Comprehension jolted him. Instantaneously, his starboard lock flung open. His darting talon seized the brain-case of 233-G and swung it inside as the lock clanged shut.

Like claps of thunder his gun turrets blasted, and the bases of the clutching arms melted into molten rivulets of running metal. Gone now was his fear of having his brain blasted. The room was filling with the continuous blinding flashes of exploding colors and the hiss of incandescent metal as his gun turrets belched streams of the deadly rocks.

So sudden, and unexpected was his violent attack that even Klarth Themselves must have been shocked into momentary inaction.

Mason had lifted his massive body up and around, driving out into the corridor before Klarth recovered. He could hear Klarth belching on full beam for Their Supers to handle the emergency.

Continuing to drive for the twelfth level, section eight, at as high a speed as the curv-

casts something that neutralizes Klarth's control. This thought transference stuff is probably some sort of a secondary effect from hookup to hookup."

Mason's fingers completed another electronic circuit and wired it into 233-G as he swung into corridor thirteen. He headed for room three. His vision, although limited by the surrounding metal walls, still penetrated far enough for him to see Supers converging from every direction, blocking every path of escape.

He squeezed into room three and following 233-G's directions, activated the mechanism that softened the outer skin.

"How many of your friends are out there?" he thought at Judy. "What's the call?"

"About a dozen. Send anything. Just kick it out that they can get in and the gadget works."

"Right," thought Mason. "Now don't bother me." Concentrating all energy on his general transmitter he broadcast the information.

"Calling all Supers! Klarth's control over you has been destroyed. If my message were not true They could destroy me. I ask you to remember your birthright. You are still

human—all of you! We must destroy Klarth. Humanity still has a job for us to do. That is all."

Mason flashed down the corridors toward the room of Klarth. His vision ranged out to see Supers beginning to battle with other Supers in the surrounding passageways. This proved that some of Klarth's subjects strove to maintain the situation as it was. Darting in and out of exploding laboratories and melting workshops, the Supers began playing a colossal game of blind-man's bluff. Friend or foe?

The vacuum of the corridors was filling with roaring torrents of molecules from the volatilized metal of the super-heated walls, expanding and rushing at hurricane speed, ripping and buckling the steel walls themselves.

Mason fought his way through the raging cross-currents toward the room of Klarth. He had one bad moment when three of the outlaw Supers that had entered from outer space caught him in a cross fire until he had identified himself.

GUN turrets bristling, every sense on the alert, Mason swept into the room of the gigantic jewel statue. The room was a shambles. The crimson statue sprawled as a shapeless blob of melted crystal.

High above, the soaring arches were sagging slowly as the heat, with no means of radiating, softened their metallic flesh. A fiery holocaust was now raging through every passageway, pushing the temperatures higher and higher.

Mason's temperature sense warned him. Rivers of molten metal were trickling across the sagging floor to gather in ever growing puddles of bubbling incandescence.

He felt uneasy. He had to get out of here soon. But where was Klarth? The far end of the room slid downward, and splashed to the floor, sending waves of glowing, molten steel lapping at his milk-white sides.

Suddenly, the roof crashed down at him. Mason fought to lift himself out into the roaring corridor as the falling white-hot metal clutched at his outer skin.

Klarth's entire metal world was melting and falling inward upon itself as he struggled and blasted his way toward the outside. He found the main exit corridor blocked by the motionless, fused bodies of two Supers locked in a death embrace.

Mason retreated and dived through the center well at headlong speed. If there was no exit—he'd make one!

Ahead of him he could see the glowing partition that sealed the well entrance from outside. His momentum increased with each passing second. He tensed as the distance shortened—and became nothing. He struck, with a smashing impact that blasted a gaping hole in the heat softened metal. He was through! Outside!

The cooling breath of space greeted him, and Mason's vision saw a watchful patrol of Supers circling at a thousand kilometers. Hastily, he identified himself and headed toward them as his stern plates watched the glowing metal sphere collapse.

Mason's thoughts were bleak as he remembered all the wonderful machines and strange sciences that were at this minute melting into unrecognizable heaps of junk. But at least the many unfortunate and unwilling brain-cases Klarth had enslaved would find peace in the forgetfulness of death. And where was Klarth?

As if in answer, Klarth's metal world unfolded, soundlessly, like a gigantic crimson flower of space, expanding in a bursting explosion that flung fiery fragments spinning in every direction.

It was the end of Klarth. They, the unconquerable brain combine, as it would always be the inevitable end for those who violated the freedom of human beings.

"Hey—!" the thought banged against Mason's mind. "How about plugging me in on some vision? I'm tired of sitting here all alone in the dark with nothing to do but read your nasty mind."

"Judy!" His own thought had a warmth in it that startled him. "I had forgotten about you."

He checked the emotions that were crowding into his consciousness.

"Have you been reading my mind, you little imp?"

Then as he pried at her brain, he unexpectedly felt her slam the opening shut as if it were a private door.

"Hey—" she flashed, "You get out of there. Sure I've been reading your mind." Then softly, "Just wait until I know you better and let you read mine."

Then a thought, that felt almost tired, came to both of them:

"Will you two people calm down and please try to remember this is still a three-way hookup?" The thought faltered a moment, then 233-G went on, "Really, I mean it. It's embarrassing."

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...



Indestructible Man

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Death holds no terror for Phil Ryan, freak of science, as he dares bullets, floods and other lethal threats while he battles to protect the greatest secret in the whole world!

CHAPTER I

The Cat That Couldn't Be Killed



PHIL RYAN whistled his way down the austere corridors of New York Biology Foundation, with no premonition whatever that he was walking into an experience unprecedented in human history. Redheaded, lanky, blithe, he looked more like a carefree college youth than a budding

scientist.

He reached the door of Doctor John Collard's laboratory and walked in. His tuneless whistling died on his lips and he stopped short, staring in sick horror.

Collard was there. But the dour biologist was not now bent over his microscope. Collard was lying face-down across his desk, and a long scalpel protruded from the back of his neck.

"Good grief!" Ryan stammered. "Who—what—happened?"

There were a half-dozen people in the laboratory. Doctor Louis Rewer, scholarly president of the Foundation; Shelley King, his girl secretary; and Ross Harben, a fellow lab-assistant. These Ryan knew, but he didn't know the other hard-faced men.

One of the strangers came forward, his bleak eyes estimating the horrified young Ryan.

"I'm Laird, of the Homicide Squad," he said crisply. "Just who are you and what are you doing here?"

Ryan stuttered, and Shelley King answered

for him. The blond girl's face, vividly pretty, was pale but she spoke steadily.

"It's Phil Ryan, assistant down in the cytology lab." She glanced at Ryan. "Phil, Doctor Collard has been murdered."

Ryan gulped. "So I see." He frowned. "Who would want to kill Collard?"

"That is what we were trying to find out when you came in," the detective officer said impatiently. "Just why did you come here, anyway? You weren't Collard's assistant?"

"No, he didn't have any," Doctor Rewer put in. "Collard was a fine research man but was always secretive about his work."

Phil Ryan shakily explained. "I did Collard a favor, and in return he was giving me my cold-shots free each week. Ever since I was demobilized, I've suffered from sniffles and the shots help them."

"I see," Laird grunted. He turned to Ross Harben. "You were working just down the hall, you said. You heard nothing?"

"Nothing until Miss King screamed," Harben said, his square face turned in a fascination of horror toward the dead man.

"I'd brought a memorandum to Doctor Collard, and I found him just like this," Shelley King put in. "Sprawled there, across his desk, with that scalpel in his neck."

She stopped and Laird nodded. "So you said. Were the papers which had been in the desk scattered like that?"

FOR the first time, Phil Ryan noticed that the desk was in disorder. Drawers were open, notebooks and pages covered with scientific notations were scattered about.

The rest of the laboratory was in perfect order. Microscopes shimmered in the June sunlight, test-tubes were still bubbling over Bunsen burners, and the few small animals

AN AMAZING COMPLETE NOVELET

Shelley King found Dr. Collard sprawled across his desk with a scalpel protruding from the back of his neck



in the cages at the end of the room were undisturbed.

"It looks to me as though somebody was after something in Collard's papers and killed him for it," Laird said. "What would that be? Was his research of a valuable nature?"

Doctor Rewer denied that. "He was always secretive about his work until he finished, as I said. But I know that he has been doing research on the regeneration or re-growth factor of cells."

"Nothing in that to kill a man for," Laird muttered. "Did he have any personal enemies here?"

Rewer looked uncomfortable. "Collard was unpopular, for he was rather a cold, unfriendly person. But certainly he had no enemies who would go to such lengths as this."

"In other words, nobody knows from nothing," Laird said disgustedly. "All right, we'll get him out of here and return later."

When the body was taken away, Doctor Rewer walked out with the detective officers, anxiously discussing the possibility of suppressing adverse publicity.

Phil Ryan sprang to Shelley's side. The girl was looking wobbly and he made her sit down.

"I'm all right," she said, still pale. "Nobody could work in this place and be too squeamish. It's just that I walked in and saw him like that."

"Sure, I know." He nodded, patting her shoulder. "Gave me a nasty shock too when I barged in like that. Who would want to kill old Collard?"

Doctor Rewer came back, looking unhappy. "I'm afraid we're in for some nasty publicity. And they tell me we'll have to close this laboratory for the time being."

He glanced at the animals in the cages, three guinea pigs and a black cat. "You had better dispose of those subjects, Ryan. Collard may have been testing viruses on them, and without knowing what he was using them for, it might be dangerous to keep them around."

Ryan nodded. "I'll take them down to the basement and send 'em off to dreamland. See you later, Shelley."

When the others had gone, Ryan picked up the two cages. The guinea pigs in one were dozing. But the black cat in the other, an evil-eyed, scrawny tomcat, whined at him dismally.

"Sorry, Peter, old boy," Ryan commiserated with the cat. "It's a tough break but

this is your last mile."

Peter had been something of a character ever since he had got out of his cage a few weeks before and had almost wrecked Collard's laboratory, to the rage of the biologist and the glee of the younger assistants.

The black cat seemed to sense what was coming, for he snarled angrily as Ryan carried the cages down to a basement room. There Ryan carried out his distasteful task as rapidly as possible, first putting the guinea pigs under a tub with a chloroform pad.

When a few minutes later he lifted the tub and drew out the defunct rodents, he shoved the cage of the loudly protesting Peter in its place. He waited again, his thoughts busy with the astounding murder. Why would anyone want to kill Collard?

Ryan glanced at his watch, lifted the tub and drew out the cage. He was startled to find that Peter was still very much alive. The tomcat uttered angry snarls and clawed at the sides of his cage.

"Not enough chloroform on the pad," Ryan told himself impatiently.

He made sure this time there was enough of the chemical to kill ten cats, and shoved Peter back under the tub to his doom.

When Ryan again drew the cage out, the whiff of chloroform he got was almost overpowering. Yet, to his amazement, Peter was still alive and squalling more lustily than ever.

"Jumping felines!" exclaimed Ryan, staring blankly at the whining cat. "I've heard of cats having nine lives, but this beats anything."

The only explanation Ryan could think of was that the chloroform was defective. Yet it had killed the guinea pigs.

"Maybe he's been doped so often with chloroform, he's got immunized to it somehow," Ryan thought.

HE WENT to a supply-room and got a thin vial of prussic acid. Putting a respirator over his own face, he tossed the vial under the tub to shatter against Peter's cage, hastily letting the tub down.

He had opened the windows, and when he lifted the tub a little later he had an electric fan going to drive the vapors out. Then he took off his respirator and went to pick up the cage.

"M-r-r-a-a-w!" Peter said loudly.

The cat was alive. He was not only alive, he looked as robust as ever he had, tail lash-

ing the cage, his green eyes blazing as though with rage at the indignities to which he was being subjected.

Phil Ryan's jaw dropped. This was no longer a joke. It was an impossibility. It was something that upset a biologist as much as a physicist would be upset if the force of gravitation reversed itself.

It was absolutely impossible that Peter should be alive after breathing prussic acid gas for five minutes. But it was so.

Ryan was an intelligent young man with no room in his head for moldy superstitions. But the unearthliness of this thing bristled the hair on his neck.

He vaguely remembered old tales of black cats who really weren't cats, who were familiars of the devil in feline form.

"Rot!" Ryan said, suddenly ashamed of his own momentary superstitions. "The tub must leak vapor somewhere, that's all."

He was so upset that he wanted to get this over with now as quickly as possible, to still the shrill snarling of that green-eyed feline who should be dead twice over.

Ryan put in his hand and drew Peter out his cage. He fastened the squalling cat onto a table with a strap, got a long scalpel, and with a deft hand drove the thin blade into the animal's heart to bring a swift and painless end.

He withdrew the blade. And then he saw something that made him doubt both his eyesight and his sanity.

The thin little wound in the black cat's side closed and vanished—instantaneously. And Peter, whose heart had been transfixed, continued to snarl as though he had not even felt it.

Ryan wondered if he was dreaming. He must have let the scalpel go awry. So he tried again. The result was the same. The wound instantly vanished and Peter remained very much alive and unharmed.

"A cat that can't be killed!" Phil Ryan gasped. "Either I've gone crazy, or this cat of Collard's is supernatural."

Collard's cat? He stopped suddenly as a glimmering explanation of the fantastic phenomenon suggested itself to him.

"By Heaven, Collard was conducting research on regeneration! And he'd been experimenting with this cat!"

Regeneration was the biological name for the power of certain animals to re-grow damaged parts of their bodies. Human beings had only a trace of that power of re-

generation—they could re-grow a damaged fingernail or a bit of skin or bone, but nothing more.

But some animals had it in high degree. A newt could grow a whole new leg, a lobster a new claw, a worm a new head. It had been believed that an unknown chemical in their bodies gave them that power.

And Collard, according to what the Foundation's president had said, had been attempting to isolate and analyze that subtle chemical of regeneration. Suppose he had succeeded? Suppose he had injected a super-concentrate of the regeneration-essence into an animal? What would be the result?

"If the regeneration-essence was super-concentrated, it would act with super-speed and potency," Ryan thought excitedly. "Instead of taking days or weeks for new cells to grow, for a wound to heal, it would take only an instant. Which is just what happened to Peter when I stabbed him!"

Ryan's excitement increased. No wonder Collard had kept a thing like this secret! The potentialities of it were terrific.

He unfastened the snarling, protesting tomcat. This was too big a matter for him. He'd show the cat to Doctor Rewer.

Ryan reckoned without his cat. Peter, when he felt the strap unfastened, seized the heaven-sent opportunity to escape. Muscles toughened by years of prowess in back-alleys bunched and then uncoiled. The tomcat seemed to explode in Ryan's grasp.

He tried to hold it but the sharp claws ripped long red scratches down his hands, and then the cat was zooming up through the open window like a black comet. The freedom of the outside world was calling, and Peter answered the call.

PHIL RYAN ran to the window. He was too late. Peter had already disappeared.

Ryan, stunned by all that had happened, turned as Ross Harben came into the room. His stocky fellow-assistant stared curiously at Ryan.

"What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I've seen worse," Ryan said with a gulp. "You know that cat of Collard's I was supposed to execute? Well, I couldn't kill him."

He stammered out the incredible story, and saw a look of unbelief come into Harben's square face.

"Is this a gag, Ryan?"

"I tell you, it's true!" Ryan protested. "I'd

prove it if the cat hadn't got away. He scratched his way free when I picked him up."

And Ryan held out his hands to exhibit the scratches. But to his increased astonishment, there wasn't any scratches on his hands.

"At least, I thought he scratched me," Ryan faltered in bewilderment. "But the scratches seem to have disappeared."

He looked incredulously at his hands again. He knew there had been deep red scratches. But they had vanished as weirdly as Peter's own wounds had vanished.

A red-hot thought hit Phil Ryan and left him gasping. It couldn't be possible!

"Wait a minute," he said hoarsely. "I may just be crazy but I'm going to try something."

He picked up and hastily sterilized the scalpel, then pricked the palm of his hand with its keen point.

For just a moment, he could clearly see the tiny wound. Then, magically, it closed and vanished.

Unwilling yet to believe his eyes, Phil Ryan ran the blade deep into the fleshy part of his hand. There was not the slightest sensation of pain. And when he withdrew the blade, that bigger wound closed and disappeared as magically as had the other.

"There!" he cried to Harben. "Did you see? It works the same on me as on the cat. I'm invulnerable too!"

CHAPTER II

Bullet Proof

RYAN'S knees suddenly felt shaky and he sat weakly down. It was too much for him. What had been fantastic in the case of the cat was wholly unbelievable in the case of himself.

Harben's eyes had protruded in amazement. He likewise showed excitement.

"Let me try that again!" Harben exclaimed. "Maybe it was just a freak place in your hand."

Numbly, Ryan bared his arm. Harben jabbed the scalpel into it. There was no pain. And when the blade came out, almost faster than the eye could follow, the wound closed up and was gone.

"I'm dreaming this," Phil Ryan mumbled

through stiff lips. "Peter's case was explainable, for I figured that Collard had injected a concentrate of the regeneration-essence into the cat. But he never injected anything into me."

Ryan suddenly leaped to his feet, appalled. "Wait! Now I get it! Collard did try his cursed regeneration serum on me!"

"What do you mean?" Harben asked quickly. "You let him test his stuff on you?"

"Let him?" Ryan sputtered. "Of course I didn't let him! Nobody in their right mind would let him make them into a human guinea-pig for stuff like that."

He uttered a furious oath. "Collard knew that, knew he couldn't get a willing subject to test the stuff on. So he tried it on me without my knowledge! Benevolently offered to give me my cold-shots free—and slipped his regeneration serum into me instead."

Harben's jaw dropped. "It sounds like Collard, at that. That cold-blooded fish would do just such a thing. Probably he figured that if the stuff had bad effects on you, he could keep quiet, but that if it succeeded, he could then make tests on you."

"Blast his lying eyes!" Phil Ryan flared. "Making me into a freak like that tomcat! I don't care if he is dead—he only got what he deserved."

He was boiling with anger that was all the hotter because underneath it was a chilling realization that he had indeed become abysmally different from ordinary humanity.

Harben's frowning face showed that he was thinking intently. He broke in on Ryan's fuming.

"Ryan, listen. You don't dare tell anybody about this."

"Why not?" Ryan demanded. "I'm going to tell Rewer the whole story. He'll believe it when he sees me run a knife into my arm."

"Don't you see what'll happen if you do that?" Harben asked. "They'll think you killed Collard, to get hold of his regeneration discovery for yourself."

That cooled Phil Ryan's blazing anger. He realized the logic of it. He would certainly become the number one suspect.

"But if I can prove from Collard's records that he himself had given me injections of the stuff?" he answered.

"There was no such record in Collard's papers," the other laboratory assistant re-

torted. "I was present when the police went over them."

Ryan felt stunned. It began to look as if not only had he been the victim of an appalling trick, but that he also was in danger of being accused of murder.

"What the devil am I going to do?" he asked desperately.

"Collard must have kept records of his experiment on you," Ross Harben said thoughtfully. "They weren't in his lab so they must be out at his cottage."

"His cottage? I didn't know he had one."

"Yes, he had a cottage out on Long Island," Harben said. "I took some papers out to him once. Probably he kept his records there."

He seemed to be thinking rapidly. "If we went out there and searched his records, then you could go to the police with proof of the whole story. It's what I'd do if I were you."

Phil Ryan, still bewildered by the incredible thing that had happened to him, saw the logic in Harben's suggestion. He was still too stunned to think clearly but he realized well enough that it was true the police would suspect him of stealing Collard's discovery and using it and then killing the biologist, unless he could prove his assertions.

"It's nearly quitting time," Ross Harben said quickly. "I'll get my car and we'll drive out there."

"I'd better tell Shelley," Ryan began, but Harben made a warning gesture.

"You'd better tell nobody! The police are still hanging around here just waiting to grab a suspect in this case. You meet me outside in five minutes."

HARBEN hurried out, and Ryan stood looking incredulously down at his own hands, his own body.

He lighted a match and held the tiny flame to the end of his finger for a moment. There was no pain! Collard's regeneration serum, it seemed, atrophied the pain-sense that was no longer needed. When he drew away the match, the little burn vanished almost instantly.

Ryan shivered. There was something ghastly about this. It set him apart from all other men, divorced him from humanity, made him more like an unkillable zombie than a human being.

"Maybe the effect is only temporarily," he thought desperately. "Maybe it'll pass off."

When he went out of the Foundation building to meet Harben, he glimpsed an amazing spectacle. In a nearby alley, a stocky white bulldog and a scrawny black cat were engaged in a vicious fight.

And the cat, completely ignoring the champing jaws of the canine, was winning that fight. The bulldog fled howling down the alley with his unscarred, triumphant feline conqueror in hot pursuit.

"Was that Peter?" Harben exclaimed as Ryan got into the coupe.

Ryan nodded numbly. "That was Peter, all right. Nothing can hurt him and he knows it. He's the toughest tomcat in the world, now."

Harben tooled the car deftly through the late afternoon traffic across the Williamsburg Bridge and then they sped northward along the north shore of Long Island.

"Collard's cottage was up at Gull Bay," Harben explained. "The police can't have been there yet for it would take them some time to learn that he owned the place."

"I wish he were alive again so that I could twist his neck," Phil Ryan muttered.

Harben glanced at him. "After all, the stuff hasn't had any ill effects on you so far. And look at the advantage your invulnerability gives you over other people."

"Advantage?" Ryan cried. "You call it an advantage to be an unhuman freak? How will people feel toward me? Do you thing Shelley would marry a creepy character like that?"

Then he cheered up a little. "Maybe Collard's notes will give some indication of how the stuff can be neutralized. I hope so."

It was twilight when Harben drove his coupe into the yard of an isolated cottage close to the shore of the Sound.

The little house was dark and looked deserted. It was a surprisingly expensive-looking place for a research scientist to own, with its own little beach and small boathouse.

They approached the front door. Harben tried it, then put his shoulder against it and shoved. The door flew open.

Ryan followed the other into the dark interior. "I suppose technically we're burglars," he said.

Things happened with bewildering rapidity. Dark shapes jumped upon him from right and left, and Ryan was borne to the floor.

He felt something sticky against his wrists and ankle, struggled furiously and found

his hands and feet were already tightly bound by strips of adhesive which had apparently been in waiting.

"Harben!" he yelled furiously. "Get out and bring help!"

The lights clicked on. And Phil Ryan, sitting bound and helpless on the floor of a well-furnished living room, let his jaw drop with surprise as he looked around.

Three men, besides Ross Harben, stood around him. The one standing directly over him was a lean, well-muscled man of forty with prematurely white hair and a cruel, brown face. The other two men were panting and rearranging their clothing from the struggle.

But what made Ryan doubt his eyes was the fact that Ross Harben, unharmed and unbound, was standing beside his captors and looking down at him also.

"What the devil, Harben!" Ryan exclaimed. "Is this a joke?"

Harben ignored him and spoke to the white-haired man. "Here he is, Lislser. And I'm glad you didn't slip up."

The man named Lislser spoke in hard, rapid tones.

"You slipped up, and badly, Harben. There was no need to kill Collard like that. It only complicated matters and made your failure worse."

"Collard caught me searching his papers and I had to kill him to keep his mouth shut," Harben defended himself. "How was I to know that he hadn't written down his formula but kept it in his memory?"

Sickly, Phil Ryan understood now how he had been deceived. Ross Harben was the man who had killed Collard in an attempt to get his regeneration-formula for these men, whoever they were. And Harben had cleverly played upon him to lead him into this trap, which he had doubtless arranged by a telephone-call when he got his car.

"You dirty double-crosser!" Ryan raged at his erstwhile colleague. "If I ever get loose, you'll regret it!"

THE white-haired man named Lislser was speaking crisply, ignoring Ryan's outburst.

"Yes, you may have redeemed your blunder by bringing this fellow to us," he was saying to Harben. "That is, if he's what you say he is. We'll soon find out."

He snapped an order to the other two men. "Carl! Joseph! Tie him into a chair."

The two men, a bullet-headed, brutal looking one called Carl and the flabby, pale one named Joseph, hauled Phil Ryan's bound figure up into a chair and tightly tied him into it.

Lislser opened Ryan's coat and shirt, baring his chest. Then the white-haired man stepped back, drew a heavy automatic pistol from his pocket, and fired twice directly at Ryan's chest.

Ryan felt the smashing shock of the bullets as they tore through his body. Yet he felt no pain!

And the two red bullet-holes in his chest, even before they could begin to bleed, began swiftly to close. The lips of the two wounds crawled rapidly together, fused. And the wounds had vanished.

Ryan felt absolutely unharmed. He breathed as usual, still felt no pain whatever. He was stunned by it, even prepared as he had been by previous evidence of his invulnerability.

Lislser's hard blue eyes flamed with repressed excitement as he stared at Ryan's chest.

"It does work!" he muttered. "Marvelous! What power this secret will give us if we can obtain it!"

Ryan controlled his seething rage. "So that's the idea?" he said harshly. "A bunch of criminals who think you can use this thing to make yourselves invulnerable, are you?"

The white-haired man uttered a barking laugh. "Criminals? Well, that's what they called us when the war ended in our defeat, but the world will find we're rather more dangerous than ordinary criminals."

Phil Ryan's face tightened. "I see. I might have known it. Remnants of the old Nazi fanatics, who went underground."

When the war had ended in Germany's defeat, the Nazi party had been shattered. But it was known that some of its most unscrupulous officers had gone into hiding, to foster a future outbreak. They had been hunted down by the police of four continents, but not all had been found.

This hard-eyed Lislser was one of them, without a doubt. And the two men behind him, also. Ryan felt a wave of fear that was not for himself. What if these criminal fanatics did get their hands on this potent scientific discovery?

"I see that you begin to understand," the white-haired man jeered, smiling ironically. "Yes, I, Friedrich Lislser, am one of the secret

band the whole world has been working to stamp out. The band who mean to redress the disaster of defeat, though it take us a lifetime."

"Bah!" Ryan answered. "You're raving!"

"And you're going to help us, Mr. Ryan," Lislser answered tauntingly. "You see, we heard of Collard's discovery weeks ago. We make it a point to keep abreast of scientific progress, so that we can accumulate a secret scientific arsenal for our future plans. Collard's discovery, which our friend Harben learned about and reported to us, would be a supreme secret weapon. It would make our future armies as bullet-proof, as invincible, as you now are!"

Ryan glared at Ross Harben. "You! One of these crazy criminals!"

Lislser laughed. "Oh, Harben's only in this for money. We promised a big sum if he brought us Collard's formula. Unfortunately, Collard was too much aware of its potentialities to write that formula down. So that the secret of his regeneration-serum is now almost lost." He grinned. "But not quite lost! You, Mr. Ryan, have a potent amount of that serum in your blood. If we can get some of it out of you, our own chemists will be able to analyze and reproduce the stuff in time."

"That's what I figured," Ross Harben said anxiously. "I thought maybe Collard had tried the stuff on his animals, and when I went down after Ryan to find out, and found that he had been injected with it, I saw he was the only chance left to us."

Lislser nodded curtly. "He has the stuff in his blood, all right. The question is to get it out."

Phil Ryan felt his skin crawl. The calm way in which they discussed the ghastly proposal was chilling.

"A couple of liters of his blood should be enough," Harben was saying. "I can take it back to the Foundation, and in the laboratories there I should soon be able to isolate the regeneration-serum in it."

"Do that, and deliver us even a drop of that serum, and you get the sum we promised," Lislser said crisply. His hard eyes looked speculatively at the seething Ryan. "How shall we drain that quantity of blood from him?"

"I brought along equipment for that," Harben said quickly. "It's in the car."

"You thought of everything, didn't you?" Phil Ryan raged at him.

Harben looked at him calmly. "I'm sorry about all this, Ryan. But it just has to be. I'm in this business up to my neck now, and if I don't go through with it I'll be convicted of murder. And I'm just selfish enough that my own neck seems more important than yours."

CHAPTER III

Strange Doom

HARBEN went out and brought back from his car a small case containing a large hypodermic and a sterile glass container.

The two men, Carl and Joseph, held the writhing Ryan helpless in his chair as his arm was bared. Then a difficulty arose. When the needle was jabbed into the blood-vessel at the bend of Ryan's elbow, the incision tended to close 'ast again immediately.

"It's as though the man was made of india-rubber," Lislser muttered. "Sink the needle deeper. That's it."

Ryan felt a sick sensation at seeing his own blood sucked out into the glass chamber of the needle. Again the process was repeated, and again.

"That's nearly two liters," Harben said finally. "It should be enough. I'll get back to the Foundation and start work on it."

"Just in case you fail to isolate the serum, we'll keep this fellow here," Lislser said. "Then if you need more of his blood for another try, it will be available."

The white-haired man talked as coolly as though Ryan were a guinea-pig.

Harben, without another glance at the prisoner, went out. Ryan knew he had departed in his car for New York. Then Lislser turned to his two men.

"We're going to have to keep this chap a few days, probably," he said. "Now, you saw that no bullets or anything else can hurt him. You can imagine what he'd be able to do if he got loose."

The bullet-headed Carl seemed unperturbed, but Joseph's flabby face became even paler as the thought sank in.

"So he must not get loose," Lislser continued. "Your necks will pay for it if he does. Take him into the bedroom, and one of you keep watch over him every moment from now on."

The order was carried out. Ryan had found his struggles useless. The strong strips of adhesive that bound his wrists and ankles might as well have been of steel.

The chair in which he was bound was carried into the bedroom, and Joseph sat opposite him and watched with a pistol on his lap.

Lisler came in a few minutes later. "You fool, what good would that pistol do if he broke free?" he demanded. "You know he's bullet-proof."

"I know, but anyway it makes me feel better to have a gun," Joseph muttered.

Hours passed. Phil Ryan's thoughts, at first chaotic, gradually crystalized into an icy despair.

He realized now how innocently he had been catapulted into the whirl of intrigue and violence that centered around Collard's amazing discovery. Only this morning, he had not even dreamed of such possibilities.

For the twentieth time, he execrated Collard's memory for doing this to him. It was just like the dour, callous biologist to use him as an unwitting subject for a highly dangerous experiment. He should have suspected something when Collard offered him the free cold-shots. Collard never did anyone any favors.

When morning came, Ryan wondered with vague hope if his absence at the Foundation might not lead to inquiries about him. They might suspect foul play, might try to trace him.

But, after a long day's imprisonment in which Carl or Joseph never left him, even that faint hope was blasted and Phil Ryan was plunged into an even blacker pit of despair.

Lisler came into the bedroom that evening, chuckling and carrying a newspaper which he held up.

"This will interest you, Mr. Ryan."

Ryan read the article the other indicated, a lead story on the front page.

SCIENTIST MURDER-SUSPECT NOT YET FOUND!

"At a late hour this afternoon, police had not yet captured Philip Ryan, young laboratory technician, wanted for the murder of Doctor John Collard of New York Biology Foundation. Ryan disappeared shortly after the murder. A general police alarm has gone out—"

"My stars!" Ryan exclaimed, appalled. "They think I killed Collard."

Lisler laughed. "Clever of our friend Har-

ben, wasn't it? I think you call it killing two birds with one stone. By bringing you out here, he not only served his main purpose but also made sure of pinning his crime on you."

The mockery detonated rage in Phil Ryan that made him strain furiously against his bonds, but to no avail.

All that night, Ryan was tormented by knowledge that he was branded a murderer. He should have known they would think just that when he dropped out of sight.

DOUBTLESS Harben would drop a few hints to reinforce their suspicions. Everyone at the Foundation would believe it, even Shelley. No, not Shelley! But everyone else would.

Morning came, and Lisler appeared increasingly impatient. Ryan heard the white-haired man muttering to Carl.

"I don't like this waiting," he said. "We've stayed in this place too long for safety as it is. Harben should have that stuff isolated by now."

Carl too was bored. And that was bad for Ryan. For Carl, during his hours of watch over the prisoner, amused himself by sitting and pegging his open clasp-knife at Ryan's chest.

Every time the keen blade buried itself in Ryan's chest, Carl uttered a guffaw. Ryan could not feel any pain from it. And the wounds closed instantly. But it was unutterably creepy to sit and be a human target for the sadistic brute.

"Truly, this thing is wonderful," Carl told Joseph when the latter relieved him. "Just think what a few thousands of us who were invulnerable like that could do."

That very thought was the one that most haunted Phil Ryan in these black hours. Even more overpowering than his personal fate was the threat of Lisler and his fellow-fanatics getting hold of this secret.

Ryan could imagine what they would do with it, how carefully they would prepare. He could imagine a well-organized outbreak of ruthless men, men who couldn't be killed or even hurt, men aiming at shattering the world peace that had been so toilsomely won.

If he could only escape! But there wasn't a chance. This wasn't an adventure movie. His captors were not dumb and they gave him not the slightest chance to get out of his bonds.

Darkness had fallen again when the tele-

phone in the living room rang sharply. Ryan heard Lislser answer quickly.

"Harben? You've succeeded in isolating the stuff? Good! I've been wanting to get out of here. No, don't bring it out. We'll clean things up here and then come into town and stop at the Foundation for it. Yes, yes, you shall have the money then."

Lislser came into the bedroom, transformed by an air of triumph. His voice was crackling now.

"Harben has isolated the regeneration serum," he said. "That, of course, means curtains for you, Mr. Ryan. We are abandoning this place completely, and naturally can't leave you here to talk."

"But how are we going to put him out of the way?" Carl demanded. He was puzzled.

"Yes, how are you going to kill a man who can't be hurt by a bullet or knife or anything else?" the anxious Joseph chimed in.

Lislser smiled unpleasantly. "I've already forseen that problem. It's quite simple. There is a method once used by American criminals to dispose of enemies which will work perfectly on the invulnerable Mr. Ryan."

He snapped orders. "Carl, in the boat-house you'll find a tub and a sack of cement I bought yesterday. Mix the cement up in the tub. Then come back in here."

Phil Ryan understood, and his heart pounded. "So that's what you've thought up?"

Lislser smirked. "That is it. With your feet encased in a tub of hardened cement, we can drop you into the Sound and be sure you'll never bother us again."

"But what if he doesn't drown?" Joseph objected.

"You fool, does it make any difference whether he drowns or not when he can't possibly get free?" Lislser snapped. He turned and stared speculatively at Ryan. "At that, your fate is an interesting question. Will you rot away before the fish eat you? Well, we haven't time to stay and observe it. We've already stayed here too long."

Ryan knew what they were going to do to him but he still couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe it until Carl came back and the three men gagged him and carried his bound figure out through the moonlight to the boathouse.

They had a tub ready, filled with quick-hardening cement. Holding the writhing Ryan vertically over the tub, they lowered his feet into the thick mass. Then they held

him tightly, and waited.

Ryan could feel the cement hardening around his ankles, and it felt like the clutch of doom. The minutes went by, the three men waiting grimly silent around him in the moonlight, and never had minutes seemed to pass so quickly.

"All right, the stuff has set," Lislser said. "I'll help you lift him into the skiff."

THE tub in which Phil Ryan was planted like a living statue was carefully lifted into the big skiff in the boathouse. Then the men took their places and Joseph bent to the oars. The boat steered out over the moonlit waters of the Sound.

Ryan felt the blood pounding in his ears. This approaching fate was too ghastly for him yet to realize its imminence. There was something unreal about it.

Lislser lifted his hand in a signal. "This is far enough. It's deep here. Out with him."

There was no ceremony about it. They picked up the cement-filled tub and Ryan with it, and dropped it over the side of the skiff.

Phil Ryan splashed down into the cold water and then was sinking through dim, chill darkness. He could feel the water rushing into his nose and he choked against his gag.

The tub finally hit a stony bottom, tilted this way and that, and then lay motionless with Ryan still planted in it immovably.

His lungs were full of water now, yet he had not lost consciousness. He was still automatically breathing—breathing water. It did not seem to discommode or injure him in the slightest.

"But my lungs can't be getting any oxygen out of water," Ryan thought wildly. "And without oxygen, all my vital organs would immediately break down."

Then he understood. He was, as Joseph had speculated, as invulnerable to drowning as to bodily injury. For his tissues and organs, though damaged by lack of oxygen, now constantly and ceaselessly repaired themselves due to the powerful action of the regeneration serum in his body.

Ryan felt the ghastly nature of his predicament. He was still living, but he would better have drowned. For he was bound hand and foot, his ankles rooted in the tub of cement, sentenced to an indefinite living death here on the floor of the Sound.

For a time Ryan remained sunk in despair,

shivering with cold, his upright body swaying to and fro in the currents like a tall, rooted plant. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the dim obscurity.

He perceived that around him lay a stony sea-bottom patched here and there with dark masses of waving weeds. Small fish swam in glittering shoals, and a few curiously approached him and nibbled his bound hands until his movements frightened them off.

Ryan's despair melted into rage.

"If I had just one chance to get my hands on Ross Harben!" he told himself.

His anger spurred him to a reassessment of his situation. Wasn't there any way out of this at all?

The cement wouldn't crumble. Lisler had been smart enough to use the waterproof variety. He would have to rely on his own efforts, and what could he do with his hands bound?

After some thought, Ryan bent over and hooked his bound wrists around the handle of the tub. Then he pulled upward with all his strength, trying to scrape the adhesive bands off his wrists.

The metal cut into his flesh. No other man could have endured the agonizing pain that would have resulted. But Ryan felt no pain, and the wounds in his wrists healed as rapidly as he made them.

He tugged on, until at last he had scraped the bonds off his wrists. But, even with his hands free, he could not move an inch while he was rooted in the tub of hardened cement.

Ryan bent down and groped over the stony sea-bottom around the tub until he located a large, loose stone. He picked it up and began hammering with it at the hard cement in his tub.

He hoped to crack the cement and work his feet free. At first trial, it seemed hopeless. He could not pound with any great force under water and his ankles were in the way. Now and then his improvised hammer wounded his ankles, but he paid that no attention.

A crack finally appeared in the cement. He pounded away until there was a whole network of cracks. Then he essayed to pull his right foot out of the tub. It came away, but was still encased in a jagged lump of cement. His other foot also had cement adhering to it.

The weight of the two masses was such that they kept him from rising to the surface. But he found that he could walk, though it

was toilsome effort lifting his unnaturally heavy feet to make the steps.

"Maybe I can walk ashore," Phil Ryan thought grimly. "But which way?"

Then Ryan noticed that one side of the waving sea-weeds was more darkly shadowed than the other.

"That must be because the moonlight slants down into the water from the other direction," he reasoned. "So that way must be east."

CHAPTER IV

Drowned Man's Return

GRIMLY Ryan started trudging over the sea-bottom in that direction. It was weird travelling. Like a fantastic nightmare that he should, without air or helmet, be tramping over the floor of the Sound!

He toiled to move faster. If he could get back to the Foundation in time to prevent Ross Harben from turning the sample of regeneration serum over to Lisler!

The sea-bottom began to slope upward, and became sandy. Finally Ryan's head emerged from the water into open air and bright moonlight. He was just a little way down the beach from the cottage in which he had been held prisoner.

Phil Ryan clumped at a heavy run toward the cottage. It was dark, and Lisler's car was gone. He broke into the building.

"Gone! They must be in New York by now."

Then he noticed how carefully the place had been cleaned out. Lisler had taken care to leave no trail. Clearing the place out like that must have taken some time.

A cigarette butt in an ashtray was still faintly warm. Ryan's hopes rose. They had not been gone for long. "There might be just time enough," he breathed.

Hastily he found a hammer and knocked away the rest of the cement from his feet. He ran out to the highway.

A passing motorist, to whom Ryan told a hasty tale of a fall into the water to explain his dripping clothes, gave him a lift to the next town. There he hailed the first taxi he saw.

"Twenty dollars if you get me to New York Biology Foundation at top speed!" he told the driver.

"For that money, I'll take a chance with speed-limits," the driver said. "Hop in."

The cab was lucky all the way to Manhattan. No siren screamed to protest their illegal speed, and there was no obstruction until they crossed the bridge into Manhattan and crashed a red light.

A traffic officer's whistle shrilled commandingly. With a word of profanity, the driver pulled up.

"Keep going!" Ryan ordered desperately.

"Mister, I'm in this business for a living, and a suspended license means I starve," answered the hackman. He stopped.

The officer came up, breathing menace. "Don't you know a red light when you see it?"

He stopped. He had glimpsed Phil Ryan shrinking back in the rear seat, and he uttered a cry.

"You're Ryan, the scientist-murderer!" He fumbled for his gun. "Get out of that taxi!"

Ryan got out of the cab, but on the other side. He plunged across the street as fast as his legs would carry him. To be arrested now would be fatal to his hopes.

"Stop or I'll shoot," yelled a stentorian voice behind him.

He kept going and then heard the roar of the policeman's gun and felt the smacking shock of the bullet hitting his back.

It didn't hurt. Ryan kept on going, diving into a side street while an incredulous policeman gaped after him.

"I was sure I hit him," he exclaimed, and then shrilled his whistle.

Ryan was thirty blocks from the Foundation and knew that his chances of making it in time were slim now. Nevertheless, he ran on toward the nearest subway.

A police-cruiser screamed around a corner two blocks ahead, and then came charging toward him.

"There he goes!" a voice yelled.

Ryan dived into an alley. A gun barked behind him and he felt another slug hit him. But he kept going. As he emerged from the other end of the alley, a second cruiser came speeding down that street.

He felt the despair of final defeat. He couldn't get away from them. Of course, he could explain to them in time. He could clear himself and convict Harben. But by that time, Lislser would have got the sample of regeneration serum from Harben and would be on his way with it to sow seeds of future horror.

Abruptly Phil Ryan had a crazy idea. He had to get out of this trap and reach the Foundation quickly, and there was only one possible way of doing it.

He jumped out into the street into full view of the approaching police cruiser. Standing bathed in the lights, he answered the stern shouts to surrender by pretending to draw a gun from his hip.

"Get him!" a voice shouted.

SUB-automatic guns chattered and a fusillade of bullets tore through Ryan's body. They brought no pain, of course, but the shock of their impact staggered him.

He threw up his arms in realistic pretense of a dying gesture, and fell prone on the pavement. Then a moment later he heard the officers running toward him.

"Get that crowd back and call the ambulance!" a heavy voice ordered. "Turn him over, Bill."

Ryan felt himself turned over, and lay with eyes closed, keeping his face frozen in a look of assumed agony.

"That's the Philip Ryan we were after, all right," spoke the heavy voice. "He must have been guilty to try getting away like that."

"He's plenty dead now," a second voice said. "Look at those bullet-holes in his shirt and coat."

"Twelve of them, at least!" a third officer marveled horrifiedly. "Funny he doesn't bleed."

"He hasn't started bleeding yet," the heavy voice said. "Will you get that crowd back? Thank Heaven, there's the ambulance."

Ryan felt himself lifted onto a stretcher and carried into the waiting ambulance. Soon it rolled hastily away.

Ryan cautiously opened an eye. He was lying in the back of the car, and across from him sat a gray haired policeman. The ambulance was speeding southward.

He waited until through the tiny window he glimpsed a familiar building. He was only a few blocks from the Foundation, now.

Ryan suddenly sat up on the stretcher and grinned in ghastly fashion at the gray haired policeman. The officer stared, choked, and went purple.

Ryan opened the rear door and dived out. He hit the pavement, rolled over, and came to his feet unhurt. In a dead run, he started across streets toward the looming building of the Foundation.

He heard brakes scream behind him and

a voice screeching.

"He came to life, I tell you! He came to life and grinned at me!"

The Foundation looked dark and deserted, only a few windows lighted where late workers were still in their laboratories. The window of Ross Harben's second-floor laboratory was thus alight.

"He's still here," Ryan thought feverishly. "And if Lisler and the others are with him, I may be able to stop them yet."

He bounded up the stairs. There in the corridor, coming out of Harben's laboratory, he saw them. Harben, Lisler, and the man Carl.

Harben yelled, going white, and pointed at the dripping ghastly figure rushing toward them. Carl snarled and shot but Phil Ryan paid no more attention to the gun than if it had been a bean-shooter.

He was heading for Lisler but Ross Harben, in his frantic attempt to flee, got in the way. Ryan smashed a hard at Harben's chin and sent the murderer reeling back to sprawl against the wall.

He whirled around. Lisler and Carl were already fleeing down the stairs and had reached the first landing below.

Ryan took no chance of their escape. He dived directly over the rail at the men sixteen feet below. Confident that no bruises or broken bones could harm him, he cannoned down into the two men like a human projectile.

Carl was flung against a step where his head cracked like a snapping twig. Lisler, hard brown face furious and eyes blazing, recognized the futility of trying to hurt Ryan and endeavored to thrust him away so that he could resume his flight.

"Sure I wouldn't come back, were you?" Ryan panted savagely as they grappled.

He got his hands on Lisler's neck and squeezed. He completely disregarded Lisler's pounding fists, which couldn't hurt him. He squeezed until Lisler's face became dark red and he dropped, limp and senseless.

Ryan bent and searched Lisler's pockets until he found what he was after. It was a tiny sealed glass vial that contained a few drops of colorless liquid.

The doors from the street burst inward and voices yelled. A half-dozen police officers leveled their guns up at Phil Ryan's swaying, disheveled figure.

"I told you he came back to life," the gray haired man among them shrilled.

Ryan made a weary gesture. "Don't shoot again," he said. "I don't mind the bullets myself, but somebody else might get hit."

Suddenly the gray-haired policeman lunged forward to tackle Ryan and bring him down to the floor. The other officers joined the fray. Ryan didn't fight. He let them turn him over and pinion his arms.

"I told you his back was full of bullet holes," one policeman said. "Look."

"But he isn't bleeding yet," said another. "There's something wrong with him."

"He ain't human," a third officer said.

"I'll explain if you'll give me half an opportunity," Ryan pleaded. "Let me up. You can still hold me."

TWO hours later, in Collard's laboratory, a high police officer and an alert-looking young Federal officer both stared incredulously at Phil Ryan.

"Oh, there's no doubt about your story," the FBI man was saying. "Harben will stand trial for murder, and Lisler and the rest as accessories. But I still just can't believe that you're really bullet-proof."

Ryan looked up at them in a tired fashion from the chair in which he was sitting beside Shelley King. "Listen, I let you shoot me and run a knife into me, didn't I? You saw for yourself."

"You're not going to do anything more to Phil," Shelley added indignantly. "It was ghastly, what you did."

The Federal man shook his head. "Well, Lisler was right in one thing. The stuff will make a marvelous weapon. This vial of it is going down to Washington, and since nobody will know the formula but our own chemists who analyze it, that weapon will remain secret." He gazed troubledly at Ryan. "But we'll have to keep you under strict guard, Mr. Ryan. If someone else got hold of you and analyzed your blood for the stuff, you can see what it would mean."

Ryan nodded miserably. "I understand. I hadn't thought of that."

He looked hopelessly at Shelley. "I guess this washes up everything between us. I'll be an unhuman freak, guarded for the rest of my life."

His voice suddenly trailed off. He pointed excitedly at the door. "Look at that!"

They looked. "It's just an alley-cat," the government man said puzzled.

"It's the Peter, Collard's cat that I told you about," Ryan exclaimed. "He's come wan-

dering back here to his old home. But look at him now."

Peter was a sad sight. His fur was torn, he limped from a wound in his front paw, and there was a bloody scratch in his cheek and another on his nose. He whined disconsolately at them.

"He's no longer invulnerable!" Ryan cried. "The effect of the regeneration serum must have passed off in him in the last day or so, and that means that the effect is only temporary, and fades away when the serum is used up."

"And since you had that serum injected

into you after it was injected into the cat, the effect will soon pass off in you too," the Federal man added. "That's fine. We'll only need to keep you guarded until that happens and then you can live your normal life."

"Phil, I'm so happy!" Shelley exclaimed tremulously, in his arms.

"I can tell you we're happy to know nobody else will be grabbing you and getting the formula out of you!" the Federal added.

Peter, alone, was not happy. He continued to whine dismally. His glory had departed. He was no longer the toughest tomcat in the world.

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UNDERMOST

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Enter the Dakar-Natal Transatlantic Tunnel, eight miles below sea-level, where brave men struggle for glory, fame and love!

CHAPTER I

Deep Stuff



NOBODY at Mid-quarters could explain why the lights, even the biggest ones, seemed dull, timid, defensive. Here at Main Office, the glow that should have been white and strong was murky dun. Murky, too, seemed the three men at the desks, men whose World League regimentals

were no neater than their must be, whose faces were pallid, glum, drawn.

Main Office was a cubical chamber full of instrument-boards and record-files. Over its door hung a peculiar sign, that bore three arrows. One, pointing vaguely southwest, carried the label:

NATAL, BRAZIL—802 MI.

A second, pointing directly opposite to the northeast, read:

DAKAR, N. AFRICAN STATES—801.8 MI.

The third, apparently tacked on last, pointed straight up, and its lettering said:

SEA LEVEL, 7.88 MI.

This was a joke, feeble but notable in a place where jokes were scarce. It was also quite true.

The men did the work necessary to keep in operation the Sub-Ocean Railway from Natal to Dakar and back. Their talk was about that work, talk grouped into the same statements, questions and answers day after day, like a vapid, unpleasant play that ran forever.

"Dakar Six, cleared in on time," droned blocky, black-browed Miggs, in front of an

illuminated callboard.

"Dakar Six clear," echoed Orbein, gaunt and wide-eyed. He turned a dial on his instrument panel to off, turned another dial to on. "Natal One ready out."

"Natal One ready out on time," verified Miggs, noting it on a tally sheet. "What if one of them came or went off schedule. I've wondered for months."

"Better we never find out," snorted Orbein. "Why can't we smoke on duty?"

"Regulations," said the third man. He was Harpence, taller than Orbein and burlier than Miggs. On his sleeve was a double brassard of rank. "That's reason enough for anybody."

"It's too much for me," growled Orbein. "Regulations, that's all I hear. All I hear from Harpence, anyway."

Harpence's hairless, egg-shaped head cocked itself. His face might have been pleasant, but for a scar that ran under the right eye, across the in-beaten nose, down to the left mouth-corner.

"Don't forget," he said, "that we live at Midquarters as well as work, and that personnel has organization and discipline, with me heading it. I'm law and gospel down here."

"Don't crab, Orbein," added Miggs. "Why are you here, anyway?"

"The World League did what I thought at the time, was a favor," Orbein snapped. "I asked for assignment. It looked interesting and well-paid. Also because my grandfather helped bore the Sub-Ocean tunnels in 2212, and my father was chief clerk of Sub-Ocean Directory in 2236. I didn't know I'd be shut up here like a toad, underground and—"

"You know it now, and we all know it," Miggs interrupted. "Don't make it worse by howling. Harpence ought to confine you to

AN ASTONISHING COMPLETE NOVELET



Alpha La Barba stood in the doorway, the weapon in her hand. (Chap. IV)

quarters, so you'd have something to yelp about."

"You can't bilge off to me—" began Orbein, whiter than usual.

"Quiet," growled Harpence. "No time to fight off grudges. Either of you so much as doubles a fist, he'll be confined. Regulations."

The two others scowled, but subsided.

"Check gauges," directed Harpence. "Air pressure?"

Orbein glanced at his instruments.

"Seventeen point eleven."

"Dynamos?"

"Number One, full head," said Miggs.

"Number Two, full head. Number Three—oh, they'll all full head. They always are."

"Fuel smash?"

"Smash prime, pressure steady," Orbein pronounced.

Miggs saw a red glow on his callboard.

"Natal One cleared out on time," he reported.

"Natal One out," echoed Orbein, and turned a dial.

The door opened.

"Relief reporting," said a woman's voice.

"Relief from what?" grumbled Miggs, but all three men looked with brighter eyes at the woman who led two men in.

She was the only woman at Midquarters, young, tawny-haired, her figure both strong and graceful. She was rosy, too, from having a violet-ray lamp in her quarters. She wore a single brassard, as Harpence's second in command. One of her men dropped into Miggs's chair.

"Dakar Six ready out," he said, and the other checked it.

"All clear, Harpence?" asked the young woman.

Harpence smiled, trying to be genial.

"Barry to you, Alpha."

"La Barba to you, Harpence." She took his place. "All clear?"

"Except between us. Why snoot me?"

Alpha La Barba smiled and shook her tawny head.

"I'm just being regulation. That's your favorite word."

"Not where you're concerned. Be nice, Alpha. I run everything and everybody at Midquarters."

"La Barba's the name," she said again.

Harpence led his shift out. Alpha checked his tally sheets.

"Runs everything and everybody," she re-

peated, under her breath. "Everybody? What about Troy Wescott?"

Troy Wescott was in the next office but two, an office that smelled rankly of perhaps half a hundred unpleasant and costly chemicals. He was one of those sinewy young men who look an inch or so taller and broader than they really are. Troy Wescott's true height and weight were average, the only average items about him. He had a face perpetually intent and enigmatic, close-cut black hair, and big hands scarred and blistered by chemicals.

Wescott held degrees of Ph. D from Chicago, and an M. D. from Cornell. He had won two second prizes for amateur middle-weight boxing, and his commission of reserve first lieutenant of Chemical Warfare, though not recognized at Midquarters, was still active. His job was sanitation and medicine. He averaged three hours daily at it, and sixteen more at his private studies. That left five hours for eating, sleeping, and quiet thinking about Alpha La Barba.

TROY WESCOTT had a front office and dispensary, cleverly air-conditioned, as well as a larger rear cubicle for a bedroom. This latter was crowded with tables, shelves, books and instruments. Before one table, Troy Wescott toiled obscurely but furiously at a tiny cylinder of the toughest metal alloy he knew. A lens, clamped at eye height, helped him study it.

He altered the cylinder's shape with an automatic drill, and with a tiny brush carefully coated it with an evil-smelling gum from a small crockery vessel. He also filmed the jaws of small tweezers before using them to pick up the cylinder.

To the table edge was now clamped a length of white metal tubing, of inner dimension exactly that of the cylinder. It was seven feet long, warped smoothly into a parabola, its far end clamped to a second table and covered by a massive jug-shaped vessel of metal.

With the tweezers, Wescott carefully slid the cylinder into the near end of the tube, where it fitted with a hair-thick fraction protruding. Then he focussed a cameralike device, which shed a narrow, bitter-bright ray on the exposed butt of the cylinder.

An abrupt explosion, with a sound like violently stripped gears followed. Wescott took hold of the tube. Its far end was straight now, making it look like a rather shallow

question mark with the jug for the under-dot. He fingered the straightened part.

"At least, the charge didn't rip through," he muttered under his breath, as solitary workers are apt to do. "Progress at least."

He next unshipped the jug and from its cushioned interior, tweezered the cylinder. It looked battered, and he sniffed sadly as he dropped it on some towelling. Then he began, carefully and with great muscular exertion, to warp the tube back to its original curve.

"Who was firing?" challenged someone from the front room. Wescott turned to his open door. Harpence came in.

"Experiment," said Wescott. "My friction solvent works for about two-thirds of the curve."

"Experiments against regulations," objected Harpence, rolling his favorite word over his tongue. Wescott negatively shook his crooked head.

"They aren't. These are my private quarters. The equipment and materials are my personal possessions, and I work during time not needed to perform my duties adequately. I read the regulation book too, although perhaps not quite as thoroughly as you do."

Harpence rubbed the tip of his broken nose.

"As commander at Midquarters I could direct you to stop."

"And I could refuse to obey, and demand an inquiry court. There's nothing to hide. Everybody here knows that I'm working on a friction solvent. It would make Sub-Ocean forever practicable."

"Sub-Ocean's already practicable," objected Harpence pompously. "Less than two hours from Dakar to Natal, including change-over of passengers and freight. Of course, we have to run Midquarters for that." He then turned elaborately ironic. "Don't tell me, Wescott, that your heart bleeds for the bored and fuddled personnel so much that you want to do away with Midquarters."

"That's a detail. What I think of is other Sub-Ocean lines, between New York and Bordeaux, Singapore and Palmerston, even San Francisco and Tokyo?"

"Mmmm," said Harpence again, and gazed at the tubing. "Looks more as if you're trying to shoot a bullet round a corner."

"That's just what I'm trying to do," nodded Wescott. He took scribbled papers from his desk. "Look, this circle represents Earth's curvature. These two secants—these straight

lines, coming together—are the two legs of the Dakar-Natal route, joining at Midquarters, close up under the bottom of the sea. Two straight tubular tunnels, short-cuts straight through Earth's crust—"

"Because we need straight tunnels for cars as fast as we run," added Harpence. "Everyone knows that. Eight hundred miles in fifty minutes—fast as strato-express planes, safe from storm, fall, or temperature hazards."

"Why not a single tunnel?" asked Wescott.

Even Harpence, lover of the obvious, disliked such foolish-sounding questions.

"The midpoint would be too deep—ninety miles down. The midpoints of our two legs are twenty-eight miles down as it is. The job of keeping air-pressure down in those six gun-barrels to Natal and the other six to Dakar is plenty."

"If we could follow Earth's curve with a shallower Sub-Ocean tunnel, everything would be easier."

"Curves are out," snapped Harpence. "Too much friction. You're finding that out with your experiments."

"Next experiment may succeed," replied Wescott.

Harpence cleared his throat.

"I can't stop you, but I can assign duties to you. Wescott, I'd like a full report on the new ration-mixes, the vitamin-synthesis and its probable effect on the health of personnel so long away from the sun. And no questions or protests. That's all."

CHAPTER II

Dangerous Mission

HARPENCE walked ponderously out. Wescott turned to another bench, on which lay samples of food-compounds in boxes. He crumbled a bit from one and dropped on acid, then set a particle under a microscope. He seemed almost to have forgotten his search for the friction solvent entirely.

Finishing his tests, he sought the tiny Command Office, next door to Main Office. Entering, he faced Harpence's mocking eyes across a desk. From Main Office came a muffled observation. "Dakar Three ready in on time." Wescott came to attention, offering his filled-out report form.

"Fast work," commented Harpence. "Did you skimp things?"

Wescott shook his head.

"It was quickly done. Provisions are well fortified, as noted here. Is that all?"

"Not quite. Breach reported in main north bulkhead, giving onto natural caverns beyond. I want a report."

"Why from me?" objected Wescott. "Can't a work crew seal the breach without me to stand by?"

"I want a report," repeated Harpence, "on the gaseous content of the caverns, as observed through the breach. I also want a considered and qualified opinion on the full nature of the caverns, as well as you can found it. This is your job, as sanitation chief and best laboratory mind."

"Do I gather accurately," said Wescott, "that you're trying to delay my experiments with friction solvents?"

"Regulations don't require that I qualify legitimate orders," Harpence snubbed him. "That's all, Wescott."

Wescott left, refusing to show his resentment.

MIDQUARTERS was shaped roughly like the letter H. Two parallel corridors to northwest and southeast, lined with machine-rooms, offices, control chambers and supply depots, were joined by a cross-corridor containing the most important offices.

On either side of this cross-corridor, into the open bays of the H, came the terminals of the travel-tunnels—Dakar on one side, Natal on the other. Each terminal was set with airlocks and depots for the shifting of freight and passengers.

This was done by means of corridors that ran above Midquarters level. Midquarters personnel could hear the dim commotion of trains, and the hurry of transfers, but never saw these things except in special situations. Emerging into the cross-corridor, Wescott walked past Main Office on his way to duty.

"Gentlemen," he heard Alpha La Barba pleading, "I know that tempers are short and hours are long, and I'm sorry. But I can't do anything about it. Won't you let bad enough alone without making it worse by squabbling?"

"Whatever you say," someone replied. "Dakar Three clear in."

Wescott, walking away, smiled a trifle. Checking trains was monotonous and wearing, but Alpha La Barba's shift was always

better-spirited than Harpence's, on duty or off. She was tactful, sympathetic—and a handsome young woman. An observer once said he'd rather see Alpha La Barba in a bathing suit than Harpence in full dress uniform.

Wescott had been half-amused, half-irritated, and Harpence, overhearing, had taken the observer's privileges away for three days. Harpence liked Alpha La Barba. Perhaps Harpence thought that Alpha La Barba was too friendly with Wescott, and was trying to spite them both.

Wescott turned up the northwestern corridor. At its upper end, a man with a pistol guarded a closed door. It was sturdy, swarthy Miggs.

"Closed for emergency repairs," he reported. "Nobody allowed—oh, it's you, Doc. Commander says you'll take charge. Better wear a respirator."

Wescott took the mask Miggs offered and donned it. It consisted of goggles, a muzzle over nose and mouth, oxygen purifier, and radio equipment for speech. He went through the guarded door.

Two workmen, also in respirators, toiled with torches and patch-metal at a great angular rent in the metal wall. Air-exhaust was going full blast, yet a smoky dullness hung in the compartment—nether-world gases were not only torrid, but sometimes colored and darkened.

"Stand easy," commanded Wescott. From his bag he brought out vials, instruments, a little panel with gauges and dials. He peered through the hole, and one man handed him a torchlight.

Wescott saw an irregular chamber, its walls and ceiling spined over with strange, dark stalactites. At the far end, showed a shadowy hole. He turned back to his gauges.

"Metallic vapors," and he checked it in a notebook. "Oxygen, yes, in compound with other gases, but—hello!"

He turned abruptly to scrutinize the lips of the opening.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

"Break reported at—" began a workman.

"It's no break. It was cut. Look."

He pointed. The lip of the metal was jagged, but fused.

"Cut by a torch," he pronounced. "Report, one of you, to the Commander and tell him this." He set down his chemicals and instruments, "I am going into the cavern."

"In there?" protested one of the men.

"I'm going to find out how and why the bulkhead was cut."

"There's things in there—not animal or vegetable, but alive."

Wescott snorted in his respirator.

"You still believe those ghost stories? Nobody ever proved there was life in the caverns."

"Nobody ever proved there wasn't."

"I told you to report to the commander."

Wescott waved him out. "You," he said to the other, "stand by. Watch these gauges, write down their position every six minutes. Also watch the acid in this open vial. When it turns from green to brown, note the time and cork it up for me to test. Understand?"

"Sure."

Wescott took a coil of thin, silk-metal cord from the workman's belt.

"Tie one end of this to your wrist. Every six minutes, when you check the gauge, give one tug. I'll give a tug back, to show things are all right."

"And if you don't tug?" the workman began, but Wescott had squeezed through the hole and was moving cautiously through the cavern, paying out his cord.

A few steps took him into darkness, but he snapped on the torchlight and fixed it to his brow by the upper part of his goggles. Its glow struggled with the murk and enabled him to see the far entry to the corridor beyond. Something glittered there, and vanished. It might have been moving, retreating.

Wescott shone his torchlight after it, and had a glimpse of a long, winding cave. He remembered that he was directed to observe and examine this unexplored chamber, part of the great honeycomb through which the tunnels had been cut. His eye, turning to the floor, saw dust, disturbed by feet or something like feet.

He headed for the far entry. Pressure increased almost at once, and he gulped hard to relieve the throbbing discomfort at throat and eardrum. The heat, too, was stifling. Meanwhile, was he alone in these dungeons? Or were the superstitions not superstitions after all? Did creatures, or things like creatures, live here under earth and under sea, questing around the bulkheads of Midquarters out of curiosity or even hunger?

In any case, somebody, or something, had scuffed up the dust of the cavern before him. He moved cautiously ahead into the cavern, which stretched away into gloom and mys-

tery. He did not know but what it might wind back and forth through all the inner substance of Mother Earth. He came to a bend and a branching.

Before traveling further, he decided he'd better check with the man at the other end of the line. He twitched the end he held. No responding twitch. Again he tugged. The cord remained slack. Turning, he headed back for the hole in the bulkhead.

The cord had been cut, and the hole had been solidly patched shut, with a big slab of metal plating.

FIRST-AID men had finished bandaging the head of the man who had been found unconscious before the mended hole. One looked up at Harpence, who stood by with Alpha La Barba and two armed orderlies.

"I think he's dying," the man murmured. "He may be already dead, and Wescott is our only doctor. He needs a medico."

"When Wescott's found," said Harpence to one of the orderlies, "put him under arrest in my office."

Alpha La Barba made a gesture of protest, and he turned toward her.

"He's the only person unaccounted for. The other workman he sent to report to me, while he was left alone with this man. Nobody else came or went, Miggs reported. Miggs was on sentry duty at the door until I relieved him just now."

"If nobody came in or out, what's happened to Troy—to Wescott?"

"Mmmm," said Harpence. "You and he know about first names, eh?" He addressed the first-aid crew. "Carry the man to Infirmary. The rest of you, set up a search party to find Wescott."

Left alone with Alpha La Barba, he smiled rather bitterly.

"You and he know about first names, though you and I don't. I thought you were all formality, Alpha. No time for friendships. It was just a question, though, of which man."

"What's happened to him?" repeated Alpha. "He isn't here."

"My party will round him up. Then you can stop worrying, while he can begin."

"You talk as if he's been convicted in advance of attacking that workman."

Harpence's smile grew broader and more bitter.

"He may have every opportunity to explain that. But maybe there are other things

he can't explain."

He stooped to pick up some scattered objects where the injured man had fallen. "Wescott's notebook—yes, his name's on it and some instruments." He studied the notes. "He'd started the checkup I ordered, but he didn't finish it. That's disobedience." He turned to the door. "Coming with me, Alpha?"

"In a moment." She wanted to be rid of him. "Go ahead. I'll see you at your office."

He accepted the dismissal, closing the door behind him. Alone in the compartment, Alpha felt the blood hammering in her temples. She leaned against the patched bulkhead and closed her eyes wearily.

However methodical and dispassionate big corporations might be, they knew the value of romantic appeal at the proper place and time. That was why she, handsome and vigorous and feminine, had been assigned to Midquarters—she would have to know it, even if Personnel hadn't explained.

She had enough authority to fend off impudences, but not enough to support any possible capricious whims of her own. She was splendid for morale too. She must admit that even to herself. It would be better still, if Harpence wasn't attracted.

It was plain he wanted her for himself. He overdid his own command position, warning off everyone except Troy Wescott, who had never seemed to need warning off. Now Troy Wescott was suspected, and mysteriously absent.

Why did her ears ring so loudly, so harshly? She straightened away from the metal that supported her—the ringing ceased.

It wasn't her ears, then, but the bulkhead! She placed her ear to it again. She heard a knocking sound, then another. It came from the bulkhead itself, the sealed part—or from behind it. The sound was out in the stifling, unknown maze of corridors through which the Sub-Ocean travelways ran!

She rapped with her own knuckles. An answering clang, then a cluster of irregularly spaced raps—a letter of the Morse Code, another—

W-E-S-C—

"Troy Wescott!" she cried against the metal, and looked wildly around her. Something lay on the floor where it had fallen, the injured workman's ray-torch. Snatching it up, she turned it on full force and began to slash with the finger of brilliance at the metal!

CHAPTER III

A Serious Threat

A ALPHA cut deep, but not through. The bulkhead was made of two plates of metal, with an inner sandwiching of non-conducting plastic that had dulled the rapping from beyond. She cut again at the same place, more carefully this time, turning a corner and making a V-shaped wound. She bored through—a puff of vapor, dull-smoky in color and filthy-smelling, struck into her face.

"I've been shut out here—Wescott!" came a radioed voice.

The smell of the hot vapor of the corridors was sickening, and she felt herself stagger, but she made another deep slash with the ray. A triangular piece of the bulkhead was free. A blow from the other side, and it dropped inward.

She now saw a face, masked by a respirator, and shoulders. Troy Wescott struggled through. He took the ray-torch from her sagging hand.

"Let me handle it," he said quickly, and shoved the piece of the bulkhead back in place. Cutting the ray to half-power, he fused the edges of the cut, then found a stick of plaster-metal on the floor. He strengthened the sealing quickly, then finally shut off the ray as he faced Alpha.

"You saved my life," he said. "I've been pounding out there for half an hour. Even with this respirator, I couldn't have kept on much longer. How did you know—"

"I didn't," she told him. "I happened—only happened—to lean against the bulkhead close to where you were pounding your signals. What were you doing out there?"

"Carrying out orders. Harpence wants a report on the caverns, and I climbed into them. Someone shut the hole up after me—someone who wanted to finish me off."

He unshipped his respirator.

Alpha's blue eyes grew round and wide. "You don't think it was an accident? A stupid accident?"

He shook his head.

"Not an accident, and not stupid. Because I went out there with a signal line, and that had been cut." He looked around. "What happened to the man who was observing here for me?"

QUICKLY Alpha told all she knew. The report to Harpence, his finding the workman struck down and the break sealed, and his orders to arrest the missing Wescott. Wescott's face, still creased by the pressure of the respirator, grew tense and grim as he listened.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll face Harpence, but first I want to treat that injured workman."

It was too late. The man had died in Infirmary. Wescott turned from his bedside, quickly initialing a death certificate. Then he tramped away toward Harpence's office, Alpha still keeping pace with him.

Harpence sat at his desk, flanked by armed aides.

"I understand that I am to be arrested. Why?" Wescott began.

"You're guilty, at least, of laxity in obeying orders," Harpence snapped. "You may also know something about the workman who was injured."

"He's dead," continued Wescott. "Murdered. But I didn't do it, and I wasn't lax in obedience. The same man who murdered the workman sealed up the break in the wall, while I was out in the caverns making my survey. Miss La Barba got me back into Mid-quarters. She will verify what I say."

Alpha told her story, while Harpence nodded glumly.

"You're clear, Wescott."

"Which displeases you," rejoined Wescott. "Why don't you start hunting for the real criminal, who killed one of your subordinates and tried to kill another?"

"Juniors do not criticize or advise seniors without being requested to do so," reminded Harpence. "Regulations. Get out, Wescott. Alpha, stay here."

But she disregarded his command, and followed Wescott into the corridor again.

"Wescott," she said, "Troy, have you any idea why anyone should want to—"

"I'll tell you after I've seen my own quarters," he replied. "Care to come along?"

He led her to where his experimental equipment had been set up.

The metal tubing had been torn from its clamps and hacked roughly to bits. His carboys of chemicals were spilled, his tubes and vials smashed. Wescott stared, and Alpha made a woeful face, womanlike, over the disorder.

Wescott turned to a speaker-box. He dialed.

"Attention to list of supplies to be purchased for personal use," he said to the clerk who answered. "Send out by next Dakar train. The following chemicals."

He rattled off a series of items, and concluded the conversation. Switching off the speaker, he turned to Alpha.

"We know why it happened now," he said. "You mean—"

"Somebody doesn't want me to make a success of Sub-Ocean transport systems."

She was wide-eyed again.

"They'd kill men to keep that from happening?"

He nodded.

"And, death and danger aside, it's the greatest of encouragements. Somebody knows enough about what I'm doing to see that it's close to success. As soon as I clean up here, I'm starting all over again."

Hours later, Dakar Five was ready in on time.

The travel-tunnel head exactly resembled the seven other travel-tunnel heads of the Dakar battery, and the eight of the Natal battery. Its opening was perfectly round, giving into a cubical unloading chamber, and the train fitted into it almost as snugly as a piston.

This metal cylinder ran on four rows of trolley-wheels, which fitted on four rails evenly spaced around the circumference of the tunnel. Both rails and wheels were made of alloys as hard and smooth and frictionless as Science could manage.

From the train's open hatchway passengers issued to speed through the unloading chamber and down a corridor to the Natal head. Crewmen followed, nimbly passing freight parcels and bales to other men with little locomotive trucks.

"Consignment for Troy Wescott, Mid-quarters," one of the crewmen called.

"Here," spoke a stocky man in uniform, stepping forward.

He received two metal jugs, some smaller containers, and several carefully wrapped packages of various sizes and shapes. All together, they made as much of a load as he could easily carry. "Thanks," he said, and tramped away toward a valvelike door labeled:

TO MIDQUARTERS.

Beyond was a dim tunnel, and some metal stairs. A shadow-cloaked figure stood there.

"Is that you?" called the burdened man.

"It's Alpha La Barba," came a voice from

the dim figure. "And this isn't a gun I'm holding, it's a squirt, full of corrosive acid. Set that stuff down carefully, or I'll shoot."

The laden one gasped and lowered his burden to the floor-plating.

"I followed you, Miggs, because I heard you talking to Wescott's orderly, volunteering to run his errand. Now I'll take—"

"I overheard the same conversation," said Troy Wescott, coming up the stairs. "You both have explanations to make as to why you're trying to get possession of my experimental supplies."

Miggs had put a hand inside his uniform blouse, but Wescott walked quickly to him, caught his wrist and relieved him of a small pistol.

"I'll tell nothing," said Miggs.

"Nor shall I," added Alpha. "I'm second-in-command. I make no explanations except to my superior—Harpence." To Miggs she said, "Consider yourself under arrest."

"I demand—" began Wescott.

"Must I put you under arrest, too?" she told him. "Better pick up those packages. Come along."

Miggs walked glumly ahead to the main corridor of Midquarters. Alpha stopped before a door and opened it.

"These are my personal quarters. Get inside, Miggs. Into the back room." He obeyed, and she locked the door on him. Then she faced Wescott. "No—"

"What's that you have?" He took it from her. "An acid-spray. Looks like one of mine."

"It is yours. I took it from your place. Don't scowl, Troy, somebody has to look after your interests."

WRYLY, Troy Wescott tightened his lips.

"You think I'm too stupid to look after them myself, do you? The eternal conceit of a woman, especially when she's the only one in the place, among a lot of mere men, and everyone crazy about her from the Commander down!"

"Everybody?" echoed Alpha. "You, too?"

"Me, too, of course. Isn't that normal?"

"You never let on," she said slowly.

"Because I had too much to do to—"

"To waste time on me?" she finished for him. "Or were you afraid of Harpence?"

"I'll show you how much I'm afraid of Harpence when I face him with my evidence," said Wescott. "He and Miggs and

Orbein are always working together. Miggs must have been his tool in this. For instance, with Miggs as guard when I went out into the caverns, the workman would be easily put out of the way, while I was sealed out there to die. Or—"

"Why do you stop?" asked Alpha.

"Because I shouldn't talk to you. Anyone."

"You don't trust me."

He shook his head.

"It isn't that. But—policy—"

"Policy!" she repeated scornfully. "You don't trust me. Harpence would. In a minute. He's honest, at least, in liking me."

"Or foolish!"

She slapped his face. He saw white sparks in the dim tunnel. There was silence for a moment.

"How in heaven's name did we start to quarrel? After you tried to help me, and saved my life before that?" he said quietly. "Put it down to strained nerves, Alpha—overwork, and the atmosphere of Midquarters."

"Now you're diagnosing your shortcomings, still scientific," she jibed. "I'll be just as rational. I'll report to Harpence on what happened."

"And warn him?"

"He'll have to investigate Miggs, you know—regulations. I doubt if anything would make him forget that."

"After which—"

"Suppose you take care of it then. Because I'll try to keep from meddling in your affairs again. I'll keep from speaking to you, even. Forever."

She walked away.

Wescott picked up his packages and carried them to his quarters. Quickly he rigged new tubing, mixed new compounds. He began his experiments again. It did not take long to progress to where his earlier efforts had taken him.

His observations occupied the front of his mind, but in the back of it spun a great turmoil of questions and mysteries and worries. Alpha La Barba—what did she mean? Would she go to Harpence and truly make the report that would expose all of Wescott's suspicions? Had she been against him all along?

If so, his own time might be short. He would spend it at his experimentation. Quickly he apportioned new chemicals and tried a variant of the solvent, twisting his face wryly at the odors that rose.

As before, he inserted a well-coated pellet in one end of his curved pipe, sent it on its way with a ray-induced explosion. As before, the pipe straightened and quivered this time, closer to the far end. Wescott examined the pellet.

"Not a single flaw on it," he observed. "Not even microscopic. But the piping—" He peered into it, with the aid of a tiny light and a small periscope arrangement. "Scraped and flawed. What—"

"You talk to yourself too much, Wescott," said the voice of Harpence, and the big Commander of Midquarters, with a mocking smile, walked in. "In fact, any talking to one's self is a bad sign. I might invoke the regulation that provides for dismissing men suspected of mental defects."

"And send me to an asylum?" finished Wescott for him. "It might be quiet, conducive to experimentation and free from you. But you haven't come in here to talk psychology."

"No. Though maybe I'm in possession of another evidence of insanity on your part. You seem to think that I'm connected with the attacks on you and your experiments."

"I see." Wescott turned from his work. "Alpha told you?"

"Only a little, and in the presence of several subordinates. Not exactly good for discipline. But you and I are alone. Suppose you speak fully and frankly. As commander, I require you to make your charges."

Wescott nodded curtly.

"It'll be a pleasure. You don't like me, because you think that I may be an obstacle in your campaign to win Alpha La Barba. And you don't like my experiments, because if they succeeded they'd eliminate Midquarters."

Harpence started, and Wescott's eyes gleamed triumphantly.

"That idea's distasteful, isn't it? Nobody can endure this place and this life except you, because you glory in being commander. That's understandable in conceited, limited natures."

Harpence grinned sardonically.

"You're pretty solid on my motives. But what about evidence?"

"Miggs," said Wescott.

"Alpha La Barba says he refuses to talk."

"But he's your closest subordinate—he and Orbein. He was in position to help in the effort to kill me by shutting me out in the caverns. In fact, without him it couldn't have

been attempted. If he won't talk now, he'll talk to proper authorities."

Harpence's face was pale but calm.

"You've made a big accusation, Wescott. We'll certainly see that you get a chance to prove it. Regulations provide that." He put out his hand to the speaker arrangement. "Attention, communications. Send this message at once—Harpence to Directors. Under Regulation 989-F-44, Troy Wescott requests immediate investigation by a ranking official of his charge that I, commander at Midquarters, have sabotaged his experiments to make more efficient the operation of Sub-Ocean transport. Finish."

He switched off the speaker, and smiled a little.

"Satisfied? Because when your charges are proven false, I'll see that you're sent to prison for insubordination and malicious accusation. There'll be no experiments there."

"Wait until the investigation's finished," growled Wescott.

"I'll wait." Harpence was calmer still, even relaxed. He turned to see Wescott's water carafe on a side-table. "May I?" And he poured himself a glassful. "Too bad, Wescott, but you've been arbitrary and—"

He sipped. Then he took a step backward, shuddering violently. The glass fell from his hand, and broke on the floor. Wescott took a step toward him. Harpence sank into a chair. His big body was convulsed, his face writhed.

"You're poisoned!" gasped Wescott. "You drank—"

"Your carafe—" gulped Harpence. "What you might have taken—"

CHAPTER IV

The Best Way Out

WESCOTT quickly mingled other liquids in a beaker. "Here, swallow this." He forced it between Harpence's lips. The trembling abated, Harpence looked up, but weakly.

"Somebody was poisoning you and got me by mistake—I'm dying—"

"The antidote may help," said Wescott, but as he spoke he could see that it was too late. Harpence slumped in his chair, but caught at Wescott's wrist.

"Not much time, Wescott. We didn't like

each other, eh? It was Alpha but now I'm out of it. She wanted you, anyway—take care of her—"

"She wanted me?" repeated Wescott. "No, never mind. Try not to talk."

"Maybe I was—short-sighted about—what you tried. Perhaps you overlooked some item—" Harpence could barely make himself heard. "Use your friction-solvent twice—"

"Twice?"

"Blend into the car material—and into the tracks—two frictionless surfaces together—"

Harpence's head sagged abruptly back, and his mouth fell open. His face was livid white. His hand fell from Wescott's wrist. Wescott twitched up Harpence's eyelid, and shook his head.

"Dead," he mused. "And his last words were the real payoff. Frictionless car on frictionless track. It would work! I've got it!"

"And I," said someone at the door, "have got you."

Orbein came in, pointing a pistol.

"This is Harpence's gun," he said. "Everything works out as it should. He took the poison I meant for you, mixed from your chemical stores. Well, I'll blast you with this pistol, issued to him. It'll look as if he killed you and committed suicide."

It would look just like that, Westwood reflected at once. And the investigating officer called by Harpence would be here, perhaps, before the bodies were cold.

"You're mad," he told Orbein.

"Only practical. Only carrying out orders. Now, you can have your choice. Quick, painless death from a slug in the head, or minutes of dying agony from one in the throat."

"Why have I this choice?"

"I want your friction solvent. Quick." The pistol-muzzle wagged like an insistent forefinger. "Where is it?"

Wescott stood still.

"Why do you want it?"

"My employers. Stratolines worked me in here, to stop you. Miggs was my paid helper. We almost finished you by sealing you out in the caverns. And Miggs almost got your new supplies, but bungled it. Well, he won't talk. I squirted poison gas into Alpha La Barba's quarters to finish him. This will be your real finish, with no line leading to me."

"Stratolines want Sub-Ocean to fail?"

Wescott could see that reasoning. "They don't feel that there's enough place and profit on Earth for both underground and

high-flying long-distance transport?"

"We won't go into big business motives. Perhaps the Stratoline people will do some Sub-Ocean transport itself, with your friction-solvent. Hand it over."

Wescott shrugged, as if in surrender. He took a beaker from his workbench.

"Here," he said. "You can have it."

And he threw it in a spattering splash around Orbein's feet.

Orbein's boots slid violently from under him. His stolen pistol spat at the ceiling. Wescott dived on top of him.

He got the gun away, hand on barrel, fingers of the other hand digging into the nerve centers of Orbein's wrist. But the wiry Orbein fought so furiously that Wescott had no time to reverse his hold on the weapon and use it. He could only throw it away.


The two now came to their feet, grappling and buffeting. Wescott was scientist enough to reflect, even in the deadliest wrestle, how civilization had never done much one way or the other to change the method of personal barehanded battle. Even with the wrestling and boxing tricks both of them knew, it was all squeeze, heave, twist or strike like bears or apes.

Orbein was becoming more primitive. He hooked a lean thumb in Wescott's mouth-corner, forced his head back, and struck his jaw with the other fist. Wescott staggered clear, stepped on his own spilled friction-solvent, while he slipped and fell heavily. Orbein dived at him, but Wescott kicked him backward, rolled over and managed to rise again.

"At least I'll—"

Orbein rushed at the experimental tubing. Wescott tackled him low, football fashion. Again they fell, but Orbein rolled on top this time. His fists struck with shattering, stunning force at Wescott's face.

Wescott writhed a leg upward, hooked it over and in front of Orbein's face and dragged him clear. When they got up, Wescott had the half-moment needed to collect himself. He began to box Orbein.

 RBEIN was handy with his own fists, and agile and long-armed to boot. Wescott wove here and there, ducked under a straightaway jab and belabored Orbein's ribs and midriff. Down came Orbein's guard. Wescott speared him in the face. Orbein went down, scrambled uncouthly away on

hands and knees.

"That gun—" he muttered. "Dropped somewhere—"

"Here's the gun," said Alpha La Barba brightly.

She stood in the door, the weapon in her hand. Orbein rose to his knees, staring blankly out of a battered face. Wescott, too, stared.

"You did come back," he said.

She nodded, a little shyly for a woman who held a gun.

"I didn't really go away angry. I only wanted a chance to listen and be a witness uncounted on, and get at the truth. I heard Orbein tell what he was doing, confess to killing Harpence and Miggs. When you began to fight, I picked up the gun. But I wasn't worried, Troy. I knew you could beat him."

"Get into that closet," Wescott told Orbein. The tall man slunk away to obey, and Wescott locked him in.

Then he gathered Alpha, gun and all, into his arms.

The bodies of Harpence and Miggs had been carried away. Orbein was marched off between watchful, armed men. Wescott and Alpha stood together, in the most remote corner of Main Office, facing the investigating official.

He was a dry, harsh little man with the insignia of a colonel. He must have been even older than he looked, for he wore campaign ribbons from the Antarctic War.

"Dakar Three cleared in on time," said one of the observers of the instruments, and "Dakar Three clear," verified his neighbor.

The colonel spoke, very quietly so that none could hear but Wescott and Alpha.

"You're both relieved from duty for forty-eight hours," he said. "You will report for me to the Board at Dakar, and make full reports on these deaths and the events leading up to them. Then, Wescott, you will demonstrate your formula for friction-solvent to the Headquarters Laboratory chiefs, and assist them in establishing its degree of practicability."

"It's completely practicable, now that I can use it on both—" began Wescott, but the colonel made a little gesture for silence.

"Save that for the scientists. I haven't the slightest technical knowledge. Take along your drawings and tentative specifications for the new Sub-Ocean route. All these duties may take as much as three hours at the time of your arrival, and perhaps two hours more on the following day, before you return. You will report back here at the end of forty-eight hours' time."

He made as if to conduct them out, then paused. "Oh, yes. When you return, Wescott, you'll be acting commander. La Barba remains as your second. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly satisfactory, sir."

They said that both together.

They followed the colonel toward the door. "Forty-eight hours at Earth's surface," Alpha said. "Forty-three of them will be complete freedom for both of us. How much of the time can you spend with me, Troy?"

"All of it. Our first thirty minutes together will be spent in the office of whoever can perform the quickest marriage ceremony."

The colonel held the door for them. They passed through.

"Natal Five ready out," said an observer behind them, and then the door closed.

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Then Conrad's voice came back sounding different. "I'm a hero!"

FIND THE SCULPTOR

By SAMUEL MINES

There were amazing possibilities—and a maddening riddle—in the epochal time-traveling machine Hank Gamble helped to build!

I WAS on the fag-end of a twelve-hour day when I welded the last bus bar in place. I lifted the rod to break the arc, and when the flame winked out I was blind until I shoved the welder's mask back.

"There it is," I said, groaning a little and fumbling for a cigarette. "The first blasted time machine. Put together by the ingenuity of man and a lot of old kitchen stoves, auto bodies and retired frying pans. And I hope to Jupiter it doesn't work."

Professor Conrad took his fingers off an electric cable and pushed back the horn-rimmed specs which were forever sliding down the steep arch of his nose.

"Why?" he asked mildly.

"Because you'll break your neck in it," I said dourly, pulling off the thick leather glove with which I had been vainly trying to get a butt out of the pack.

"They said that to the Wright brothers," Marc Conrad replied.

"Sure, and they did—or a lot of other lads did. Anyway, I don't see why it should work."

"You've been working with me for two years, Hank Gamble," Conrad said. "If you don't see it yet I can't hope to explain it to you now at the last minute."

"Oh, I don't mean the gadget itself. Heck, I built every circuit into the blamed squirrel cage—designed some myself. Electrically it's impressive enough."

I glowered at the thing which looked like an oversized telephone booth crammed with dials and controls, with lots of open space where only bars or plexiglas held it together.

"It's the whole blasted theory of time travel," I said. "I don't believe there is such a thing as time, actually. It's just an invention of man's so he'll know when to meet a train. Fact, I'm opposed to time and to clocks. They annoy me."

Professor Conrad shook his head.

"Time is not an artificial conception, Hank. It's a dimension, as Einstein said, but it is more than that. For example, you admit this planet, Earth, is moving, do you not?"

"Yeah."

"Suppose I ask you to locate it for me. You can go to work with a map of the Solar System and try to find it. What do you find? You find you have an orbit, not a point. You can give me its exact location for today, but tomorrow your answer is wrong. Yesterday your answer was wrong. The planet has moved. Therefore three dimensions are not enough to locate the Earth. You must add the additional dimension of time. Earth is at such and such a position—when? Do you see?"

"Sure," I said, grinning with the thought that I had him now. "And if you go back in time to the spot where Earth was yesterday do you find it? No! It's in tomorrow! So your whole idea of traveling back in time is screwy. The Earth keeps moving ahead. You go back, Marc, and it won't be there."

He smiled.

"That's very clever, Hank. But I told you that time was more than a dimension. It's a whole set of circumstances, not an isolated phenomenon. I believe that if I go back in time I move along a fixed spiral of events and I will always find the Earth where it should be. However, that is relatively easy to understand. What I intend to do is much more difficult, Hank. I propose to go into the future."

"Oh, fine. In other words you're going to a spot the earth hasn't even reached yet and you expect to find it there. How can it be, Marc? How can it be there and here and everywhere else simultaneously?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't have to go," he said, pushing back the specs. "I've got a hunch, maybe no more than that. And you'd be surprised how many of the scientific miracles have come out of nothing more than a hunch. You'll have to take me on faith, Hank—the same kind of faith that made people believe in Biblical miracles."

"When you going?"

"Tomorrow. We'll need some sleep. And I want to invite some of my distinguished and skeptical colleagues so I can watch their eyes bug out as I disappear from sight. You'll have to be rested because you're controlling this end."

THE time machine had an elaborate set of controls inside. It could be adjusted, according to Professor Conrad, to reach any point in the past or future without marginal error of more than eight hours. It had an automatic return device which could be set for any length of stay. And on this end, I could bring it back with a magnetic coupler if I thought an emergency warranted it.

I slept pretty well that night. I always do, even if I'm worried. But in the morning I tried once more.

"Look, Marc," I said. "Maybe you'd better let me go."

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, kid, you're a great brain and all that, but you're not much when it comes to the rough-and-tumble. And nobody knows what kind of bug-eyed monsters you're liable to run into where you're going."

He opened his eyes a little and the specs slid down his nose and he made a grab for them.

"Why, Hank," he said, punching me. "I didn't know you cared."

"Skip it," I muttered.

The savants and graybeards began to arrive and Marc was in his glory, showing them through the lab and explaining the brand-new time machine and how it was supposed to work. The old boys were very eloquent. "Humph!" was about the gist of their conversation, though some asked questions in mathematical formulas that rolled off me like the well-known rain off the equally notorious duck.

The lecture was finished finally and Marc showed the bunch to seats which he had arranged in a semi-circle around the machine. There were the presidents of three big universities, the Mayor of New York, two research geniuses—or is it geni?—from Westinghouse and General Electric, and a little dried-up hunchback of a man who worked in the basement of his Brooklyn home and was said to be closer to creating a pocket-sized cyclotron than any man alive.

They sat there watching, and I could tell that not a man of them believed the thing would work. That put them in my camp because I didn't either, yet I wanted to toss them all out.

But Marc never turned a hair. He stepped up into the machine and began to set his dials.

"I am going five hundred years into the future," he explained. "The progress of mankind should be so stupendous in that time that we should find it an amazing period. Anything further into the future might be beyond our capacities to understand. Now, gentlemen, no matter how long I stay in this world of the future, even though it be weeks, months or years, I will set the machine for return to this same day, so that to you I will seem to have been gone only perhaps a few moments. Please watch closely."

Considering the fact that he had never done this before, and so far as anybody knew he might just be committing hari-kari, it was amazing, the surety he displayed.

"I have a transcribing machine," he told them, "into which I will speak to record my impressions as I go. Unless something happens it should give us a complete record of my experiences. All right, Hank, I'm ready."

I felt like the man at Sing Sing when he pulls the switch, but I wasn't going to show Marc Conrad that he was tougher than I. I walked over to the big generator and yanked down the knife switch.

The current built up and the generator whined up into the higher octaves. I could almost feel that colossal magnetic field building up around the squirrel cage. Conrad's face seemed to waver as though seen through water. I wondered: if the blamed thing warped space wouldn't it warp this building right out into the street? The assemblage was leaning forward, staring.

Then the machine began to fade. The field closed in and the flickering got bad. Con-

rad's face blurred and everything ran together. Then it was gone. There was only the little dais where it had stood.

A deep breath went out of those scientists and every man turned to stare at his neighbor. My heart was lurching around like a drunk, and I picked out a chair and sat down.

"Amazing," said a professor. "Where do you suppose he's gone?"

"Most astonishing illusion," said another. He hopped up and passed his arm through the space where the machine had been. "No, it's not optical. He's gone."

"Better sit down, Doc," I suggested, "before he comes back and runs you over."

The professor went back to his seat. He'd barely got there when the flickering began again. The machine swam out of the mists and began to take shape.

"He's back," someone whispered.

"Where is he?"

I couldn't see Marc. The flickering was beginning to clear and the machine to stand out sharply. I leaned forward and thought I saw something. The flickering steadied and I pulled the switch so that the magnetic field collapsed. I ran forward and pulled down the protecting bar on the front.

A little trickle of blood edged toward me. Conrad was in there, slumped in a heap like a bundle of old rags. There was blood all over him.

"Good heavens!" said someone behind me.

I GOT my hands on him, as gently as I could, and started to lift him out.

"Hank?" His eyes opened. "Don't move me—I'm done. Bricks—fell on me. All—crushed—inside. Made it, Hank. Five-five hundred years. Saw the future. All—on record—play it. So long, kid."

He was dead. Just like that. Thirty seconds ago he had been right here, without a scratch on him, and he had gone five hundred years into the future and came back crushed to death. It was too much for me to get all at once. I didn't feel anything.

I lifted him out, carried him to the couch. The scientists clustered around, clucking. The Mayor bustled to the telephone and called the police.

"This is murder," he said firmly.

"Who you going to arrest?" I asked.

"Maybe you," he said darkly. "This is very funny."

The others milled around helplessly. I wiped Marc's face and pushed the glasses

back on the bridge of his nose. I felt like a kid lost in a big department store. I went back to the machine. There was blood on the floor and I wiped it up. Then I saw the other thing on the floor.

It was a bronze head. I pulled it out and held it in the light. It was Marc.

Whoever had done it was good. It was almost alive. You expected him to push the glasses back on his nose and start to talk.

"Now where did that come from?" the Mayor demanded.

He had the mentality of a cop. Anything unexplained annoyed him.

"He apparently brought it back with him," one of the graybeards said, pulling his beard. They were beginning to be plenty scared now. "Who could have done it? And so quickly?"

"You forget," I reminded him, "that he could have stayed there for years and still come back here within seconds after he left."

I reached in and turned on the transcriber.

"This is Marc Conrad," it said.

It gave me the creeps to hear his voice again, alive, when he lay there on the couch, just slipped out of life. The gang stopped milling around and crowded in close.

"The room is fading out," the record said. "I see it as though through water, with the faces of all of you rippling and running together and slowly growing dark. Now it is all black. I could be stone-blind. Wait, there are flashes of light running like quicksilver through the dark, streaks and comets of color. There is a sense of motion and of twisting that does unpleasant things to my stomach. I hope I shan't be sick. Does this feeling of motion mean I am moving in space as well as in pure time? It must be, for as I told Hank yesterday, there must be movement through the three physical dimensions as well as time if I am to meet this planet elsewhere in the time stream. It is at a different point for each point in time.

"Something just went by. Something enormous. I can't even venture a guess as to what it is, though it was glowing a dull red. It might have been quite bright, perhaps a star, but it may be that I am moving close to the speed of light.

"The sickness is growing worse and I feel very dizzy. I wouldn't want to—"

The voice failed and there was only the scratch of the stylus. He'd passed out all right. Nobody moved. They were frozen,

staring at the machine. It scratched along for some time. Then the voice came in.

"Better now. Must have fainted. We seem to be slowing down. Yes, the light is growing stronger. Here's the flickering. I see buildings . . . Holy smoke, what buildings!

"This is the future, it can be nothing else! The buildings are incredible, staggering monoliths, soaring up like mountains. Each is a needle piercing the sky, surrounded by acres of green park. No jamming, no congestion. There are people strolling on the walks, superb-looking, healthy people. The men wear only shorts, the women little more. Yes, they see the machine. They're running toward it. I'm going to open the bar."

There was an empty scratching again. Then Conrad's voice came back, sounding different. It was laughing, happy.

"I'm a hero! These people know all about me. It is in their history books that I made the first time trip in Nineteen-forty-five. So I'm a pioneer. The legend of the first time trip is well preserved. There's even a bronze head of me here, standing on a stone base in a little park. It's old—it's been here for a long, long time. Apparently my own age will recognize the importance of this discovery.

"The year here is Twenty-four hundred and forty-five, just five hundred years past our time. I couldn't begin to touch on the scientific marvels I have discovered. But I shall take notes and make as many sketches as I can, to bring home. I shall be very busy for the next few months, but I'll try to get to the machine at least once a day to report progress."

Scratch, scratch again. Then a shorter report. He was a hero all right, a legendary figure out of the past. The people were light-hearted children, freed of the curse of work, with nothing to do but throw parties. Marc got around. It was as though George Washington should suddenly return to New York of Nineteen-forty-five. Wouldn't we throw him a party though! And take him around and show him all the statues of him! And all the streets and squares and cities and things named after him! Well, it was that way with Marc Conrad.

THEN, about the ninth day came something different.

"There's a snake in this garden of Eden," Marc reported. "The people are afraid of invasion. Somebody's been raiding cities. Whether they are pirates from another part

of Earth just after women and loot, or are actually from another planet nobody knows. They come in so fast that nobody can tell what their ships are like. They may be rocket stratosphere fliers, or may actually be space ships from outside Earth. But they've done a lot of looting and burning and killing.

"These New Yorkers of Twenty-four-forty-five are not fighters. They're psychologically trained out of the killing habit. And these attacks leave them bewildered and frightened."

Scratch, scratch. Then Marc's voice came over, hoarse and loud and panting.

"Raid!" he gasped. "They're bombing the city now—or leveling it with some kind of destructive ray. Can't see the ships—too high—too fast. All these tremendous buildings—crumpling! Tons and tons of stone, brick, metal—pouring down, burying everything! The whole city is being destroyed! I'm getting out of here. I'll bring back that bronze head as proof—"

He was gone, leaving the machine open. We heard sounds then, sounds such as we had never heard before. There was a horrible screeching whine as of something cleaving the air with unimaginable speed. Then a mighty sustained roar like Niagara amplified a thousand times. Far away there were crashes and deep, heavy vibrations almost below the level of hearing.

This went on for tense minutes. Then a metallic clang close by. And Marc's voice, hardly recognizable, weak, distorted, in agony.

"Got it," he whispered. "I'm hurt—wall collapsed. I'm—coming back—"

That was all. I shut it off. The men were staring at me, at the machine, at each other. They felt, I knew, as if madness were stalking them in that quiet room. Could they believe what they had just heard?

I don't know what they believed. I didn't care. I felt just then that I had to do something or I would go crazy myself. Emotion was boiling up in me, and boiling up until I had to get rid of it or burst. So I did something which I suppose was typically crazy. I went back to my room and got my Service revolver. Then I came back and stepped into the machine.

Sure it was crazy. What good was a revolver against atomic bombs or rays which could bring down buildings bigger than the Empire State? But the madness had got me and I had to do something.

"Hey!" the Mayor beefed. "What are you doing?"

He was too late. I shut down the bar, turned the dials up five hundred years and closed my switch. I'd been thoughtful enough to start the generator as I went past it. I had to trust the boys not to monkey with it while I was gone.

The room swam out and things got black. I went through the same blackness that Marc had described and I got just as sick. But I didn't pass out. I saw the dark lighten and the sun and sky swim back. The machine stopped. And I stood still and looked out at death and destruction.

I don't know by how much I'd missed Marc's time here in the future. But the killers had come and gone. The city that Marc had described was a tumbled, smashed heap of rubble. Parts of the great buildings still looked up, but the rubble had covered almost everything with broken stone, brick, glass and steel. And nothing moved in all that wilderness of wreckage. It was worse than Hiroshima.

I lifted the bar and got out. Glass crunched underfoot. I moved stiffly, like a man in a dream, picking my way over the heaps of rock which had once been buildings. I found a way that was fairly clear and I followed my nose. There was utter silence here. Not a voice, not a scream, not a sound of bird or insect.

Walking, I came to a little triangular park where no rubble had fallen. The trees were untouched, the grass was green, the flowerbeds were bright with color. It was a stamped oasis in that terrible desert of destruction. And right in the middle of it was a stone pedestal. Something had been on top, but it was empty now. I saw letters carved on the stone.

MARC CONRAD

Hero of the first successful flight through time, from the year 1945 to 2445. His courage and daring opened vast new horizons to release the earthbound feet of man.

This was where his statue had been. The bronze bust had rested on top of the stone here. I put my hand on it. It was like a breath of Marc lying dead there in his room five hundred years away.

This stone was very old. The carving was dim and weather-beaten. I wondered how long it had been here. And all at once I felt horribly alone and small and scared. I was

the only living thing in this dead city. For endless miles around me the desolation stretched. Only Marc—his memory—and I stood here alone. There was nothing for me to do here. I turned and went back to the machine.

IN THE return trip I missed by six months. Maybe it was bum navigating, maybe there was that much error in the machine. Anyway, when I got back there were two cops on guard in the room and only one of the graybeards.

"We thought you were gone for sure," they told me.

"I went to see," I said. "Every word he recorded was true. I saw that city he described—wiped out. Every living thing buried. I saw the monument put up for him. Am I under arrest?"

"I guess not," the cop said uncomfortably. "We were talking about putting up a memorial to you, too," the graybeard said. "Marc Conrad was a hero, and we were making up our minds about you. Come and let us show you."

They took me in a car and brought me to a brand-new park. It was small and triangular, with young trees planted around it and flowerbeds bright with color. And in the center was a stone pedestal with carving on it. On top was the bronze head of Marc Conrad.

I felt a little cold touch of fear. I was afraid to go up and look at it, but I moved my legs and made them take me there. And I read:

MARC CONRAD

Hero of the first successful flight through time, from the year 1945 to 2445. His courage and daring opened vast new horizons to release the earthbound feet of man.

It was the same. I had just touched this stone, five hundred years old in the future. Now I was touching it brand-new, with the carving in it still fresh and bright. But there was something worse. I lifted my eyes to the bronze head.

"This—this head," I croaked. "This is the one Marc brought back?"

"Yes," they told me.

"Then where did it come from?" I shouted.

They stared at me.

"Look," I said, getting a grip on my sanity. "Marc went into the future. He found this park, just as you see it here. The stone pedestal was here, the bronze head on top. He took the head off and brought it back. So you make the park and make the pedestal and put the bronze on top. But who made the head?"

They looked at me and I felt things start to swim again.

"Don't you see?" I begged. "There's something missing! The sculptor is missing. Marc had to bring his bronze back from the future in order for you to put it here, so he could go into the future and find it waiting for him. But where did it come from? Where in that time link is the man who made it? Don't you see that there's a piece missing from the time cycle?"

They saw what I meant all right. But they hadn't seen that park in the future as I had, so they had the choice of believing or not believing me. To protect their own sanity, they chose not to believe me.

I didn't have that choice. I had seen the park. I knew that Marc had brought that head back from the future into the past so it could be put in place and stay there and wait for him to go into the future again and find it. And the whole crazy cycle was going round and round in time forever just as it was going round and round in my head.

I'm not doing much these days. I'm just sitting and thinking. I'm wondering how this city will change in the next five hundred years, grow into a magnificent place of monoliths and parks. And then suddenly a strange machine will come out of the past and Marc Conrad will be here again—though he is dead and has been dead five hundred years.

Marc will stay nine days and take the head and go back to the past, back with his crushed ribs to die. And then I'll come here again, though I too will have been dead a long time, and presently follow Marc back to find them putting up the pedestal in the new little park. And once again that maddening cycle will begin, to go on and on forever as long as time spins its threads.

I sit here and think about it and I wonder if I will go mad.

Invaders from Venus battle to capture a frozen Earth in THE ICE WORLD, complete novelet by Ross Rocklynne, next issue!

ROCKET PANTS

By NOEL LOOMIS

Determined to save a friend from ruin, Arne Pearce and Hugo Drake race madly through space in a rocket ship, daring the sinister malice of treacherous Marcus Barr!

CHAPTER I

Into Space

THE locker-room of the Interworld Spacefield was oval, lined with green glass lockers and dotted with brown-glass trainer's tables. Arne Pearce's tan body was stretched out on one of these.

"Even in the year Twenty-five Hundred, A.D., they can't keep the smell of sweat out of a locker-room," he said to the trainer.

"A room that smelled all fresh and clean wouldn't be a locker-room," the trainer answered. "Turn over."

Arne squirmed onto his back.

"Pull those straps up tight," he said. "They say this new ship will go twenty G's."

"Suck in your abdomen." The trainer was winding an elastic leather strap around Arne's naked middle. "Twenty G's?" He was sarcastic. "You may be the toughest test-pilot in the Solar System, but not even you can take twenty G's and live."

Arne grunted and held his breath when the strap pulled up.

"Then what's the ship got it for?" he retorted.

Two glass doors slid back into the wall and Hugo Drake hurried in from the coffee-room.

"Make it snappy," he said. There was a worried look on his square face. "We're due to blast off in twenty minutes." Hugo was black-haired and short, but solid as a Jupiter moon-rock.

"I'm ready," Arne answered as he slowly smiled.

Hugo always worried. Arne watched the trainer fasten the end of the strap, then rolled off the table. When he stood up, his tall-

ness was revealed. He took a step, shook his blond head, and groaned.

"I'm bound up stiffer than a rocket-tube." He started to don his spun-glass tunic, but paused as he saw the look on Hugo's solid face.

"What's eating you, son?" he asked quietly.

"Marcus Barr is out there." Hugo's voice was serious. He nodded toward the coffee-room. "He says he'll be back on Earth in the *Black Streak* before we get into Jupiter's orbit."

Arne stepped to the sliding doors, parted them and went through. Voices greeted him.

Arne grinned. A curious hush had spread over the room. He glanced at the little glass tables, the long, pink-tinted counter, the black-haired waitress behind it. Well, Arne felt he'd a lot rather buy coffee from a black-haired girl any day than from a machine. He squinted at the chronometer over the door, then looked back at the girl in her orchid spun-glass tunic.

"Nice eyes," he thought, and strode to the counter.

"Give me a hot slug of Martian coffee, and make it fast."

"Yes, Mr. Pearce," she said softly.

"Rocket-pants to you," he retorted, watching her eyes.

HUGO DRAKE had followed him in. Arne was starting to sit down beside Hugo when a heavy, hairy man swung around on a stool and stopped them.

"All set, Rocket-pants?" The hairy man guffawed. But no one else laughed. Arne's blue eyes grew steely.

"You stick to your instruments, Marcus," he said coldly. "That's the only way you can fly." He and Hugo sat down. The girl gave

A COMPLETE INTERPLANETARY NOVELET



"All set, Rocket-pants?" the man swung around and guffawed. But no one else laughed

them coffee.

Marcus Barr's face turned dark red.

"You can't fly in space by the seat of your rocket-pants," he growled. "That's all Old Roman ever taught you."

Arne's face began to freeze up.

"He taught me a lot of things you'll never know." He gulped down a mouthful of coffee. For just a moment Arne felt bitter. "And leave Old Roman out of this."

Barr had been on his neck since he'd crawled on his first rocket-tricycle. Marcus used to race him around the spacefield, and then would give him a licking if Arne came in first. Marcus had always been bigger and heavier. Then "Old Roman" Flannery had taken Arne under his wing, had taught him to fly. Ever since that time it had been Arne against Marcus, flying-sense against instruments. Of course, Old Roman used instruments as everybody else did, but he always put the most emphasis on the man.

"You've got to have the feel," he told Arne. "And you've got it."

Arne looked at Marcus.

"I hear you've just gone on a long trip."

Barr didn't answer.

Arne's coffee tasted bitter now, even for Martian coffee. He handed the girl a dollar.

"For luck," he said, and strode out.

He went down the illuminated sidewalk, with Hugo hurrying along beside him. "Do you suppose that he'll beat us?" Hugo asked.

"Naw," said Arne. He glanced down at the square, dark head in the glass helmet. "We've got the best ship and the best men. How can he?"

Arne and Hugo pushed through the vanadium gate. The spacefield was flat as Saturn's rings and flooded with krypton light. Through the transparent fence Arne could see a million faces crowding in to watch the start of the race. Out in front, half a mile away, stood the *Space Cat*, like a giant seven-hundred-foot cigar on end, with its silver nose towering into the black New Jersey sky.

A white-haired man came up. It was Old Roman Flannery. He walked firmly, but he shook his head when he laid his thin hand on Arne's muscular arm.

"It's all up to you, Arne. I've sunk ten million in this boat. If we win, my factories will be busy for three years, and there'll be a swell job for you, delivering the ships to Mars."

"Where's the Martian War Commission

now?" Hugo asked.

"They're sealed up in the observation tower. Too much oxygen here for them."

"What will happen if Barr comes in first for the Sun Company?"

Old Roman Flannery shook his white head.

"We'll both be out of jobs," he said. "You see, my whole theory of space-flying is on test. The Sun Company leaves everything to instruments. They run practically a robot ship. That's all right if everything goes well, but I claim it takes a man to meet emergencies."

"Now—maybe I was wrong. Maybe I haven't developed my instruments fast enough to handle my ships. Maybe I've depended too much on the man. I was raised in the old school, and so I taught you to fly by the seat of your rocket-pants. I could have been wrong, Arne. If I was, it'll hurt you more than me."

"Skip it," Arne said gruffly. "I'm young."

"Barr is the best instrument man in the System," Old Roman warned him. At those words, Hugo Drake looked gloomier than ever.

"Yeah. But we've got the best ship. How about the preliminary tests?"

Arne grinned at Hugo, trying to cheer him up.

"All even," Flannery answered. "So far, their ship's as good as ours. The Martian commission demands a field test. Nobody knows what it is. They left sealed orders in the control-room. Open them after you start. Marcus Barr follows you in the *Black Streak* from the other field in thirty minutes. You'll have to do what is to be done in those orders, get back here more than thirty minutes before he does, and set the boat down just as it is now."

"Okay," said Arne. He looked into Old Roman's eyes and for an instant placed his strong hand upon Flannery's thin shoulder. "How long have you had the super-heaters on the jets?" he asked.

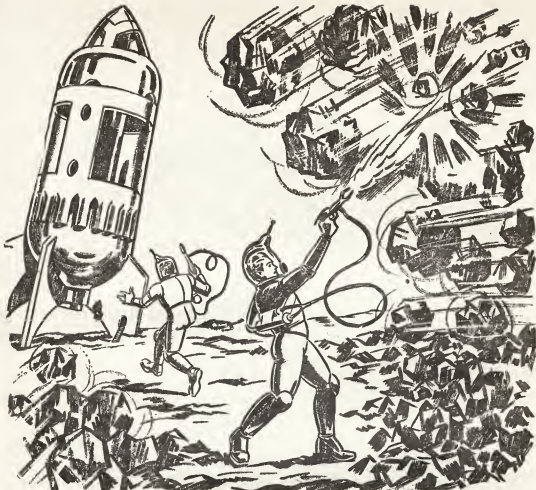
"About fifteen minutes."

"Fuel tanks full?"

"To the brim."

ARNE glanced at the big chronometer over the spaceport.

"Come on, Hugo," he said. "We blast in ten minutes." He gripped Old Roman's hand for an instant. "Don't worry," he said in a confident voice. "We'll win." Hugo and he



While Arne Pearce fired at the flying chunks of coal with his heat gun, Hugo Drake made a desperate dash toward the spaceship

climbed into the rocket runabout and darted across the field, and stopped the machine under the jets.

"Boy, she's got power," Hugo breathed, looking up into the black eight-foot cylinders.

"Power to burn," Arne said. "And that's just what we're going to do with it."

The rocket-ship stood on its rear jet, a huge thirty-foot-wide cylinder flush with the end. A third of the way up its sleek beryllium sides, the row of eight-foot jets, white-hot now from the super-heaters, completely encircled her body. And far up, almost out of the lights, another row encircled her middle.

"Gosh," Hugo said. "Power and more power."

Arne got out and approached the ship.

Hugo followed him. A great, swelling roar of applause arose from the field. Arne looked back.

The Old Roman was standing with a little knot of men at the gate. It was Roman Flannery who had taken him out of the orbit of Marcus Barr, had taught him all he knew, had given him every chance. You couldn't let down a man like that.

Arne Pearce and Hugo Drake waved their acknowledgements through the narrow passageway between huge fuel-tanks. He and Hugo jammed themselves into a tiny elevator, shot up to the boat's nose, stepped out into a space like the control-room of a submarine.

It was a room filled to the last inch with shining instruments, luminous dials, levers, wheels. The floor was at right angles to

the ship's body, so now, with the ship standing on its tail, they walked normally. When they got into space it wouldn't matter which way was straight up.

Arne Pearce sat stiffly in his glass chair, feeling the leather thongs tight around his middle.

Drake posted himself near the firing mechanism.

"Four minutes," Arne snapped at Hugo.

"Cut the heaters."

"Right."

Hugo pressed a button.

"Feed in fuel."

"Right." Hugo opened a valve. "Ready."

Arne touched a button.

"Fire," he warned. A roar enveloped them. The boat trembled, shuddered as if to take off, then settled down.

"Holy smoke," said Hugo, his dark face puzzled. "I gave her too much."

"She's just barely open," Arne corrected him.

"What the devil are we burning?"

Arne grinned.

"A new fuel. Oxygen and a liquid mixture of ethylene based on a xenon compound."

HUGO stared at him.

"But xenon doesn't combine with anything."

"This does," Arne said. "The Old Roman figured that out. When it explodes, you can imagine how powerful it is. We've got power to burn, son."

"Thirty seconds," Hugo warned. He was watching a mass of dials.

"Here goes more," Arne said.

He watched the inclinometer. She was highly maneuverable but she was touchy. He didn't dare let her tip past the center of gravity. If he did, she'd fall over on her side and it would take hours to get her upright. He maneuvered the jet controls. The boat shivered and swayed, then settled back.

"Blast!" Arne snapped.

He shifted a lever one notch. The roar of the rear jet enveloped all other sound, all senses. It penetrated even their soundproof glass helmets like a giant wind. The boat leaped at the sky, like a huge silver cat, her jets blasting out flame that spread a giant blue-green mushroom against the earth. Arne was shoved down in his seat, but forced his way up, grinning.

"It's only three and a half G's," he told

Hugo. "You don't weigh but five hundred and fifty pounds now."

Hugo was breathing hard.

"Why don't you give her the works?" he gasped.

Arne grinned.

"Keep your rocket-pants on, son. We're already through the troposphere and we aren't warmed up." He glanced at the speed-dial. "We're picking up speed three times as fast as you'd drop if you fell out of here. Right now we're blasting about nine hundred miles an hour. Wait'll we get out of the earth's atmosphere."

This brought a groan from Hugo. Then he looked around and frowned.

"Where are the guns?"

"No artillery," Arne told him. "This is just a reconnaissance boat. The Martians can circle Venus in this thing faster than their big eyes can see what's beneath them."

"What's the good of that?"

"Ultra-fast cameras, sonny. Speed about eff-point-one."

"Who started that war, anyway?"

Arne shrugged. "Nobody knows. They've been fighting it for four hundred years already. The Martians figure to win it if they can get the ships they want from Earth. Mass production is what they need."

The vision screen was before him, purple-black with stars like bold marbles of yellow or red light. The jets made a ring of blue-green fire around the after part of the boat's body.

Hugo tried to get up but failed.

"How long does this go on? What are we making now?"

Arne's blue eyes flicked at a dial as he slowly spoke up:

"She's beginning to ride better. We're doing eighty-eight hundred now."

Hugo considered. "Eighty-eight hundred already on the rear jets alone."

Arne's lean jaw was grim. "We'll be doing eighty-eight million before we let that greasy Marcus beat us out. Open the orders."

Hugo tore the end from an envelope, took out a single crisp sheet of paper, read it and stared at it.

"What's it say?" asked Arne.

"Nothing much," growled Hugo, his voice despondent. "We're to bring back pictures of Japetus."

"Japetus?" Arne swallowed. "That's the sixth moon of Saturn."

"Yeah."

CHAPTER II

Dangerous Mission

ARNE drew a deep breath. "Eight hundred million miles two ways. That's no reconnaissance. That's an expedition." His eyes were narrow. "But this boat's a shooting fuel-tank. We'll make it with some to spare, if we don't spring a leak. But for a job like that we'd better not use our front jets at all unless we have to."

"We're heading right, anyway," Hugo said.

"Yeah. Has Marcus taken off yet?"

"I can't see. Too many clouds over the earth."

Arne kept the boat at three G's until the speed-dial showed two hundred and eighty thousand, then he cut off the fuel.

"We'll coast till Marcus comes in sight."

"I'll say it's a real test," Hugo said. "If we accelerate too far we use up our fuel. If we don't accelerate far enough we lose the race."

"Yeah." Arne was tense. He was thinking of the Old Roman.

"Instruments are swell, but it takes a man to shove a space-boat through the ether," the Old Roman once had said. "You've got a head. Use it."

Arne was using his. He had already calculated exactly the maximum speed he could attain for the distance without running short of fuel. That was easy enough. The factor he couldn't calculate was Marcus Barr. So now he was waiting for Marcus Barr to show his hand.

Barr showed it. The big black space-boat, blunter than Arne's, swished by above them, zooming out a fiery tail of rocket-flame which stretched for miles in the ether.

"He's making about four hundred thousand," Hugo said soberly, watching the vision screen.

"Yeah." Arne's hand reached grimly for the fuel-lever. "Get down in your seat, son."

He needn't have bothered saying that for, as the boat lurched forward, Hugo sank down in his chair.

Arne grinned.

"One thing about this vertical control-room. You don't land against the wall."

Hugo glared at him from his chair but didn't answer.

Inexorably Arne set the acceleration lever.

The dial showed three G's, moved steadily up to three and a half, quivered for a moment, and stopped at three and three quarters.

"Should have held her there, all the time," Arne muttered. "But this new fuel makes me nervous."

PLAINLY Hugo was worried. Barr was an instrument man. Undoubtedly he had automatic calculators to show what he could do on his fuel. Arne didn't like working with so much acceleration. Acceleration used fuel. Barr must have something up his sleeve.

"How fast now?" Hugo gasped from within his helmet.

"Nine hundred and eighty-five thousand," Arne said, watching the vision screen. There was no sign of Barr's jet blast in the cold, black void ahead.

"What's the course?" he asked Hugo.

The short man checked his charts. "Forty-two-oh-eight mils."

Arne set a luminous needle and cut down a little on a right jet. A moving light finger wavered from the right and settled down on top of the needle. Arne cut the jet back in.

"What's the detector say?" Hugo asked.

"They're dead ahead."

"How far?"

Arne read one of the dials. "About a million and a half, near as I can estimate."

His hand reached for the lever. He didn't take it off until the needle reached nearly five G's.

Hugo groaned.

"I don't know about you, but I couldn't stand up if I wanted to."

"You might as well get used to it. We'll catch him or find out why. What's the heat on the jets?"

Hugo scanned a row of disks without moving his head. "Number seven's getting hot. About fifty-three hundred degrees."

"Don't worry. Those new alloy jets will take eight thousand before they burn up. But watch it."

"Right," Hugo mumbled.

Arne didn't feel so good himself. Breathing was difficult. He raised his arm to turn on more oxygen. But there was a tremendous crash at the boat's nose. She shuddered and deflected, swerved fifty thousand miles off her course. Arne watched the bearing needle and swung her back, but he didn't cut the acceleration.

Hugo's face was white.

"What was that?" he asked.

Arne was staring at the vision screen. He turned full power on the long-range telescope.

"Sounded as if a jet blew off of Marcus' boat," he muttered presently. "It's a wonder we didn't crash. It must have just scraped us. What's our heat at the nose?"

"Twenty-three hundred," Hugo mumbled.

"We're doing over two million miles an hour. We coast." He moved down the accelerator lever.

"Thanks," Hugo muttered. He got up wearily, opened two bottles of lime juice and handed one to Arne.

It was eight days later they came in sight of the black ship.

"Holy cow!" Hugo said. "He's replacing that jet out here in the ether."

"That's funny," said Arne. "It'll take hours, and he doesn't need the jet at this time. Why doesn't he wait?" He swung around to Hugo. "I've got it! He's driving that ship with a robot-pilot. He sets the acceleration, then he takes a shot of anti-grav and some kind of dope. The speed cuts down when he nears a gravitation field, gives him time to take charge. That saves his strength."

"Yeah," Hugo said. "But if he's got a robot, how come it didn't cut the fuel when that jet overheated?"

"I don't know," said Arne, shaking his head. "I guess there are a lot of things about this flight I don't know."

"It's against the rules to use a robot, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, but we can't prove anything."

They passed the black ship a hundred thousand miles to the left, swung back on the course and continued to swirl through the ether at two million miles an hour without rockets. Arne watched the black ship behind them as long as he could see it.

"I don't like the set-up," he said grimly. "Barr isn't letting us get ahead for any good reason. There's something phony about that jet business. I don't believe he dropped one at all."

"What can he do by letting us get ahead? He's got to have pictures."

"I don't know," said Arne. "I wish I did."

TWO days later Hugo got out of his chair for a bottle of lime juice, and floated up toward the boat's nose.

"Turn on the gravity plate in the floor,"

Arne ordered. "We're coming within Saturn's field."

He used the superheaters on the reverse jets, set just ahead of the forward jet-ring, and presently the ship began to slow down. He avoided the three rings of the big planet, scanned the cloudy, syrupy circumference of Saturn, and swung around it.

"There's Japetus, off to the left," Hugo said.

"Right, son. Now we slow down for a swing."

"Where's Marcus?" Hugo asked.

"You can think of the most depressing things," Arne said, with the corners of his mouth turned down. "I wish I knew. I haven't seen that boat since we passed it." He looked at Hugo and frowned. "What's the matter with you, son. You're bloating like a poisoned space-rat."

Hugo looked sick, but he stared back. "You're not so good, yourself."

Arne shot a glance at the pressure gauge and drew a deep breath.

"We're losing atmosphere," he said quietly. "Down to three quarters of normal now. When that jet hit us, it must have weakened our nose."

Hugo glared at him, then jumped from his chair. Five minutes later he was back, his face white.

"There's a three-foot rip in the prow and it's getting bigger," he said soberly.

Arne drew an unsteady breath.

"Which means we've got to land. We can't weld that stuff in space."

He said it hopelessly. He knew such a type of repair would delay them hours. They would be forced to slow down, stop, fix the hole, and then go through the long process of acceleration all over again.

"Maybe it doesn't really make any difference how long it takes," he said slowly. He thought of the Old Roman, white haired, thin hands on his arm. "But we'll do our best," he said between set teeth.

They swung around Japetus. The satellite was small, about a thousand miles in diameter, of a solid black material which gleamed dully in the dim light of the sun, nearly nine hundred million miles away. They cruised for two hours, spiraling in closer and closer, but seeing nothing but black soil which was deeply creased, always showing a surface which had plenty of sharp angles.

It wouldn't be easy to land the big vessel on such a surface. She was built for re-

connaissance only, not for landing in strange places. But finally they hovered over a flat plain, and it took Arne half an hour to set the ship down tail-first without tipping it over. Then he jumped into a space-suit, adjusted his pressure and oxygen, climbed up through the beryllium nose to the outside.

On the satellite, it was like walking on air. He didn't weigh over ten or fifteen pounds. He took a quick look at that odd geometric world of jagged black flint, and went to work. He'd just got the torch going when he heard Hugo's anxious voice in his helmet radio.

"Arne, we've used fifty-five per cent of our fuel!"

Arne gritted his teeth. Forty-five per cent left. Enough to reach Earth, but not enough to attain any such speed as they had used coming out—and he had a feeling they would need a lot more fuel than they had. He worried about that as he hastily closed the rip in the boat's nose.

He knew Hugo was worrying, too. The short man always took things seriously.

"Come on outside and look around," Arne ordered. "We can take back some samples. There doesn't seem to be any life here." Exploring would give Hugo something to do.

"Right," Hugo said.

Arne had just climbed inside and tightened the big crossarms which bolted the Space Cat's nose in place, when he heard a yell from Hugo in his audiphone, and the sizzle of Hugo's heatgun. Arne sprang over and replaced his helmet on his head.

"Where are you, Hugo?" he roared.

"Just under the tail. This stuff is after me and I can't get back to the boat!"

Arne leaped through the control-room, shot down the tiny elevator, ran out between empty fuel tanks.

Hugo was a hundred yards away, facing the boat but walking backward. He was backing up from something. Arne didn't see what it was at first. All he could see was the substance of Japetus, a black material seamed with silvery streaks. But Hugo kept backing away and firing his heatgun at the ground.

Then Arne realized that the ground was moving! Blocks of it had detached themselves from the surface in chunks and were jerking along toward Hugo like huge pebbles on a vibrating screen.

"Great moons of Mars!" Arne roared. "The stuff's alive!"

CHAPTER III

Living Coal

LIKE a flash he raced toward Hugo, feeling the blocks stir under his feet as he ran. Soon he was at Hugo's side, facing the moving mass. The chunks were without eyes or ears or heads or legs. They rocked along, moving slowly but with increasing speed. Before long, the whole plain was advancing on them.

Hugo's face had grown white.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think I know," said Arne. "That stuff is a type of animated coal. They used to have chunks of it on Earth as curiosities. I've seen samples of the coal in the Inter-space Museum."

"Can the chunks hurt us?"

"I don't know," said Arne. "But those lumps are heavy."

A block of coal, two feet square, bounced ahead of the others. It heaved itself over and fell on Arne's foot. He grunted and pushed it off with both hands, then darted out of danger.

"They'll pile up on us and crush us!" he yelled into his helmet phone.

He tried his ray-gun on them. It split them into tiny pieces, but these pieces picked themselves up and continued to advance like an army of nut-sized coal. Hugo kept backing away his face white behind the glass. A block of coal at least five feet high came bouncing along toward them.

"You got an H. E. pistol?" Arne shouted.

He saw Hugo pull the gun from his holster and fire it at the block. He knocked off a corner that must have weighed three hundred pounds, but it didn't disturb the thing at all. The lump continued to advance, and the piece knocked off straightened itself out and came on, too. He hit it in the center and blasted it into a belt of asteroids, but all these pieces picked themselves up and rattled along toward them.

Perspiration was streaming down Arne's face.

"A planet of living coal," he muttered. And suddenly a terrifying thought came to him. Suppose the coal on which the Space-Cat rested began to move!

He darted a look behind. There the ground

was still quiet. It was only where they passed that the stuff woke up and came after them. Perhaps where the spaceboat had rested, its tremendous weight made it impossible for the stuff to move.

"How could it break off and the pieces live?" Hugo muttered.

"No special organs of any kind," Arne said. "Just living cells. They can stick together or live apart. It doesn't make any difference."

Hugo was using his heat-gun again. Suddenly Arne saw something that made his heart jump. He saw hope. Hope of everything, of winning the race for Old Roman, even. A block of moving coal began to smoke at one corner. It burst into flame. The rest of the block didn't mind. It kept advancing.

"Listen, Hugo!" Arne cried.

"I'll listen to anything," Hugo muttered. "They don't even stop when you burn them."

"That's it!" Arne Pearce had become tremendously excited. "We start running, make a wide circle, get back to the boat, lead about ten thousand tons of this stuff inside, close the door, and take off. The stuff will probably die inside the boat. Anyway, it can't get into the control-room. It depends on weight alone to kill."

"Oh, gosh," said Hugo. "What do we want it for?"

"Listen, son," Arne's voice was sharp. "This stuff burns. I've seen it powdered in the laboratory. It it's fine enough it explodes like liquid oxygen. We'll take on a load of it and use it for fuel. Come on!"

"That won't ever work," Hugo groaned, but they turned quickly and started to run. It wasn't hard to keep ahead of the moving plain, but at every step a new creature rose up from the ground and started after them. The whole planet was a mass of coal, huge blocks, medium-size blocks, and little pieces, bouncing along after the two men. But they kept ahead of the flying chunks. The two men made a wide circle and, by the time they reached the *Space-Cat*, they were exhausted, but the black material near the *Cat* didn't stir when they stepped on it.

MILLIONS of tons of loose coal came after them, crossed the quiet space, piled up at the air-lock with terrifying speed, then more of the stuff climbed up on the pile and started through the door. By this time, Arne had turned on the jet-heaters. Hugo, pallid faced, backed up slowly, keeping just

ahead of the coal.

It filled up the narrow passageway and overflowed into the empty lower tanks through the openings used by workmen. Finally Hugo dragged himself into the control-room.

"We've got all we can hold," he said wearily. "Do you think we can blast off."

Arne's jaws were tight.

"If we don't burn away the stuff we're standing on," Pearce replied.

Thirty seconds later blue-green flame was blasting from the upper jets. Arne watched the vision screen.

"The coal below is beginning to smoke," he said quietly. "We've got to wait. We can't take off cold."

Three minutes later the ground burst into flame. Arne reached for the lever.

"Here goes everything," he muttered.

The big ship quivered, shuddered, rose an inch and fell back, tipped perilously.

The ship started down, but it fell slowly because of the light gravity. Arne's lithe fingers flashed on levers and wheels. The jets on the falling side screamed in a cosmic roar.

Like a meteor, the *Space Cat* flashed into the air!

"We're off!" Arne shouted. Hugo didn't answer. He was lying limply in his chair knocked senseless by their sudden start. Behind them the sixth moon of Saturn was burning. Billions of tons of coal creatures would cease to exist.

Arne cut the acceleration to three G's, revived Hugo and set him to pulverizing the coal with compressed air. Hugo was back an hour later, black from glass helmet to spunglass shoes.

"The left fuel-tank is filled with coal powder," he reported.

Arne grinned at him.

"You look like a fragment of bituminous yourself. You'd better get something to clean up your clothes."

He turned back to his instruments and glanced into the vision screen.

"Holy Jupiter!" he muttered. "The *Black Streak* is ahead of us!"

Hugo squinted at him through the black-dusted helmet. "Where?" he asked.

"About two hundred thousand off to the left. He's accelerating just a little. He's watching us and getting ready to pull out when we come close. He must be figuring on running us out of fuel and leaving us

stranded in space. Then he'll have everything."

"But the pictures?" insisted Hugo. "He's got to have pictures!"

Arne jerked up with a deep groan.

"He's got them already. That's where he went on that trip last week. He bribed somebody and got a look at the secret orders. You remember that crack he made about getting back to Earth before we left Jupiter's orbit. He knew where we were going. He already had the pictures, and could wait for us. He could outrun us because we wouldn't have enough fuel. Get it?"

"Oh, gosh, yes," groaned Hugo. "I get it. We're sunk."

"No, we're not. This ship will do twenty G's."

"You're crazy. We can't stand ten G's."

"We'll see. That is, if this coal-stuff will burn the way we want it to. Now is the time to find out."

Hugo rubbed a cloth across the face of his helmet and sat down. Arne reached for the lever.

"I'm cutting in the tank," he muttered.

He didn't feel as calm as he pretended. This was the critical period which would tell whether they had a chance to beat the *Black Streak*. The stuff might burn more readily than Earth coal—or less readily. It wasn't likely to be just the same. If the stuff burned, they might do it. If it didn't, everything, he thought dully, was lost.

He shifted the lever and watched the screen with anxious eyes. The blue-green flame that circled the boat changed to yellow, then to red, to orange, to purple. The jets sputtered, missed fire, roared, sputtered again, then crashed into a steady blast of purple flame. The *Space Cat* leaped forward.

"Wow!" he said. "We're a coal-burner! We're back five hundred years—but it works!"

Hugo sighed and slumped in his chair.

ARNE cut off the oxygen and watched the dials. He cut the oxygen back in. He cut the xenon, watched a moment, then looked up.

"Works better with the oxygen," he announced. "I'll feed in just a trickle of xenon to keep it going."

"They named you right," Hugo said with his eyes following Arne's hands. "Rocket-pants. You could run a spaceboat on gasoline, even."

"But not on nothing," Arne reminded him. "Tighten up your anti-gravity wrappings, son, and hold your innards in place. We're homeward bound, and we're in a hurry."

He cut in the rear jets and pushed their acceleration to five G's, while Hugo lay crushed down in his chair.

"When do we hit terminal velocity?" he muttered.

"The speed of light is the only terminal velocity in the ether."

The *Black Streak* also was using both rings of jets by this time, and for twenty hours they trailed Marcus Barr's ship. Arne was sleepy, tired, heavy in his seat, but he left the acceleration at five G's. At the end of twenty hours they were less than five hundred thousand miles behind.

"The coal is going fast," Hugo said.

"You'd better pulverize that other tank, then," Arne answered, his heavy eyes watching the vision screen.

"I can't even get up," said Hugo, trying, but sitting back down with a crash.

"Sure you can." Arne started up, but the five G's got him. He couldn't raise his thousand pounds.

"Okay," he said. "I'll cut her down long enough for you to finish. But we're still behind and we're supposed to be thirty minutes ahead."

An hour later Hugo was back.

"All done," he reported, wearily. He caught the hand-rail and pulled himself heavily into the chair.

"Then tighten up your wrappings and take a shot of antigrav. That'll tense your stomach muscles. The *Black Streak* has gained a million miles on us."

"Listen," Hugo said. "We can't do this."

"Is that so?" Arne growled. "Back in the twentieth century, the U.S. Navy required a nine-G power dive on every test ship. And one pilot went to fourteen. We're just as tough as they are. Ought to be tougher, because we're used to it."

He didn't add that the pilot who went to fourteen G's also went crazy. He knew brain cells could burst under too much pressure, but he figured also that five hundred years of evolution in spaceships should have helped.

He put the *Space Cat* up to seven G's and left her there, watching the needles with his shoulders crushed down and his vitals trying to tear loose inside him. Hugo protested once.

"I can't take it!"

"Barr is taking it," Arne yelled back.

Hugo didn't say anything more.

But hours later they still trailed the *Black Streak*. The *Space Cat* was blasting over three million miles an hour.

"But it's not enough!" Arne muttered.

They coasted for a few hours and then Arne put the boat back up to seven G's. There were alternate periods of acceleration and coasting, periods of anxious freedom from the weight of the G's and then a period of strained, crushing weight that kept them down in their glass chairs.

On the ninth day, Arne looked over his instruments. Earth showed on the vision screen, her dark face toward them. Less than a hundred million miles away, he figured, with a sudden shock of weakness. About a day left, and he had to gain over a half hour on the *Black Streak*. With strained, weary eyes he checked the fuel-gauges. There was coal-dust left, plenty of xenon, but the oxygen was low.

"Hugo," he snapped, "How's our jet-heat?"

Hugo looked from half-opened eyes at the instruments before him.

"Funny," he mumbled. "They don't show anything."

"The gravity's got you," Arne snarled.

"They have to show."

"They don't. And neither does the nose-heat."

Arne stared at his own instruments. Shook his head heavily and stared again.

"What in Jupiter!" he roared. "They're all gone!"

CHAPTER IV

The Winner

HUGO had no answer. He continued to stare, dully. But Arne set his jaws. Only then he became aware of the fine black powder that had been drifting in through invisible cracks and had laid a sooty coat over the control-room. That powder must have gotten into the instruments and clogged them.

He inspected all the instruments. Even the inclinometer was haywire. Nothing was left working but the vision-plate, the fuel-gauges, the speed indicator and the gravometer. Then Arne's jaw set itself stubbornly.

"We give her the works," he snarled. "We either beat the *Black Streak* in or we land on the Sun. If we run out of fuel we won't be able to stop."

"Who cares?" Hugo mumbled.

Arne didn't warn him that he was cutting in the big thirty-foot rear jet. It would eat up fuel, but that couldn't be helped. The mighty jet came on with a roar like a runaway comet and the *Space Cat* lurched forward. Arne glanced at Hugo. The short man was limp in his glass chair.

Arne watched the gravometer. It went to eight G's. He pushed the acceleration lever. Nine G's. Ten G's. No longer could he raise his arm. He pushed it across the chart-table and held on to the acceleration lever, and hoped the chart-table wouldn't break under the weight of his arm.

They were gaining on the *Black Streak*. A little later they passed it. The big blast from their rear jet was purple and green. It shot out for ten thousand miles as they swept along through space. Arne pushed the lever another notch and the gravometer went to eleven G's. Under that tremendous pressure a man couldn't think of anything but power. Power to burn.

More power. The needle went to twelve G's. Hugo had passed out. Better for him. Gravity didn't torture an unconscious man so much.

Thirteen G's. The chart-table crashed under the weight of his arm. But not before Arne gave the lever a final desperate shove. Through blurred eyes he saw the needle shoot to fourteen G's, and then he crashed to the floor, conscious but completely blind.

Arne Pearce realized in that terrible moment, that he had ruined everything. He couldn't get up from the floor, couldn't reach the acceleration lever. They'd overshoot Earth by millions of miles. Oh, well, he thought wearily, a test pilot leads a hard life, anyway. . . .

He regained consciousness some time later. He turned over to rest his side, and suddenly he realized he was of normal weight. Their acceleration, then, must have ceased for some reason. He got up from the sooty floor. There was no blood around him. He must be all right.

He glanced at Hugo. The short man was stirring, too. Arne wondered where they were. He looked at the chronometer. Fourteen hours had passed! His eyes opened wider. How about the speed?

Arne Pearce now shook his head in amazement, then stared again. He swung on the gravometer. It showed zero. He scanned the pen-line on the gravometer chart record. Then he leaped, caught Hugo by the shoulder, spun him to his feet.

"Whatsamatter?" Hugo growled. "We stopped? How fast we going?"

"Nobody in the System will ever know that," Arne shouted. "The dial shows only to five million miles an hour, and the needle

"How do we land now?" he asked hopelessly.

Arne let out a long breath. Then he snapped into action.

"Empty all the personal oxygen tanks into the fuel-tank," he cried. "We might make it. Coal must be gone, but we should have plenty of xenon left. Come on. Whip it up. We're going in!"

But Hugo shook his head.

"Never make it, Arne," he said sadly.

"It's the Cage I Made for My Trained Gorilla—and I've Been Trapped in it for Three Weeks!"



MARK HAVERFORD, the mysterious scientist, spoke out of the depths of great despair. And Jeff and Laura Pembroke, honeymooning in West Africa, shuddered at the implication of his words.

"Yes, it's the cage I made for him," said Haverford. "See for yourself! Was going to experiment on him. The laugh's on me, I guess. It's he that did the experimenting! It's unbearable—"

"But now it will be all right," promised Laura, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Now we'll get you out. We must."

"Maybe you think so. You don't know this cage. Had it made double strong, idiot that I was! Special fool-proof lock, too. Even a professional safe-cracker couldn't pick it. And if those bars—well, if a gorilla couldn't smash them—you'd both better watch out. When he comes back—"

Man against monster! Primeval forces in control! That's the dread state of affairs in *TITAN OF THE JUNGLE*, by Stanton A. Coblenz, a complete novel of startling adventure in a world gone topsy-turvy. It's a novel that will hold you enthralled—and provide plenty of food for thought, too. Look forward to it—in the next issue!

is broken off against the post. But look at that chart?"

Hugo wouldn't look.

"How many G's?" he asked weakly.

"Sixteen G's! You lop-eared Venusian bullfish. Sixteen G's and we're still here to talk about it! Earth's just ahead, and the *Black Streak* must be a couple million miles behind."

"Are we coasting?"

Arne jerked up with a sudden prickling of his scalp. They must be coasting. Why? There was only one answer. The fuel was gone!

Hugo knew that, too.

"We'll try!" snapped Arne.

"We've got to land on our tail, the way we took off, and the inclinometer isn't working," Hugo reminded him.

Arne's lips were tight and grim.

"Empty those tanks," he ordered.

DULLY HUGO stared at him. The shorter man quite plainly knew they were going to die, but he answered, "Right," and went to work, gathering all the half-gallon containers they had and pouring their contents into the big tank.

"Won't make a trickle down there," he muttered.

"We'll try," Arne growled.

He didn't start cutting their speed until they neared the Heavside layer. He used the forward reverse jets carefully. Their speed dropped steadily. He turned the super-heaters on the upper ring of eight-footers. He circled Earth three times, crossed the Atlantic at fifteen thousand feet and headed for the American appendage that was New Jersey.

It was dark in the western hemisphere. The Inter-world Space port was glowing in kryton light. Arne Pearce swung low over it and heard a mighty roar, but his face was drawn and taut.

"Not enough fuel left to maneuver her," he said desperately. "And no inclinometer."

Hugo turned his haggard face toward Arne.

"What do we do?"

Arne raised his sooty eyebrows as if the answer was obvious.

"We just turn her up and set her down."

He slowed to a stop. Used the under jets to hold her up. Let her slip earthward by the tail, slowly through the troposphere. Slowed her more.

The lights of the Interworld Spacefield glowed brighter. He cut speed.

The fuel-gauges now showed zero. If the fuel ran out now they would drop. He set his teeth and waited. Felt a hard bump. There was still fire in the jets. But the Space Cat tipped toward the ground, starting to tip over.

"We're gone," Hugo groaned. "No instruments!"

"We've still got our rocket-pants," Arne snarled. The face muscles around his eyes tightened. He forgot about the instruments and concentrated on the feel of the boat.

He gave the left-hand forward jets a blast of power. The boat steadied. At that pre-

cise instant he cut the power. The boat moved two yards, swayed back a yard while he held his breath. Then she settled down, shuddered a moment, and was still.

"We made it!" Hugo shouted, fumbling with his glass helmet.

"You're cock-eyed right we made it."

At that instant the jets, all the way around the big boat, sizzled and died.

They stepped out of the air-lock. Thousands of faces, far off, showed like white splotches through the transparent fence. A thunder of mighty shouting came to their ears.

The Old Roman was waiting for them, with a smile on his lined countenance.

"The *Black Streak* isn't in sight yet," he shouted. "You took 'em!"

Arne shook hands with him and jumped into the rocket-car.

"It still needs gumption to run a space-boat," the Old Roman said to Hugo as Arne drove off.

"And how!" the sooty faced Hugo echoed. "You don't know the half of it."

Arne sent the rocket-car bouncing across the field, and wearily crossed the illuminated glass sidewalk. He walked into the coffee-room. The little waitress with her black hair and her orchid-tinted spun-glass dress was there. She ran to the end of the counter. Her brown eyes shone like cosmic sparks.

"You won, Rocket-pants," she asked him.

"Sure," Arne said. He twirled his blackened helmet over the rose-colored counter. "How about a hot slug of Martian coffee?" He looked her over in the soft glow of the krypton light. She was short and chunky, and cute as a Venusian mermaid. And she still had nice eyes.

"How about a swing around the Moon tonight?" he asked.

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(Adm.)



He permitted Professor Kirkland to carry him

JONES' PHYSIQUE

By WILM CARVER

The odd case of J. Maurice Jones was only a scientific problem—until a gunman went on a rampage!

PROFESSOR David Kirkland's long, genial features clouded as he went to the phone.

"It will have to be Jones, and no help for it," he muttered disconsolately. "All of my other friends told me that they were going to a party."

He dialed a number, and flinched as a bubbly, highpitched voice came from the receiver.

"Jones," he said then, reluctantly, "can you come over to help me with an experi-

ment? . . . Yes, yes, I know you're eating, but this is important. . . . What's that? You'll make the rest of your steak into a sandwich, and eat it in the cab? Very well, then, but hurry."

He hung up, sighed, strode down a hall, and turned into his laboratory, a big room cluttered with scientific apparatus of all kinds. Against a wall, stood an enormous black cabinet, that, save for the rows of electronic tubes on top, gave the impression of a coffin fashioned for several circus fattest

men on earth, whose last request was that they be buried together in layers.

Kirkland went to a metal table, picked up an object and examined it absordedly. It was a replica of an automatic shotgun, no longer than a match, but so true to scale, and perfect in each infinitesimal detail, that it seemed as if waiting for some Lilliputian hunter to shoulder it, and trudge along woodland paths in search of microscopic quail.

The professor laid the fairy gun down amid an assortment of other Lilliputian paraphernalia—a Webster's standard dictionary no larger than a postage stamp—a bust of Washington, resembling the likeness which may be seen on a quarter.

"It works on small objects," Kirkland mused. "But will it have any effect upon larger things?"

The shrill buzz of the doorbell sent him hurrying toward the door. He halted as a sharp click came from the cabinet, then shrugged as he saw that a breeze, billowing in through an open window, had blown the cabinet's door shut. He turned to the front again, opened the door, and a mountain of blubber waddled in.

"Hi, Dave," the newcomer said, licking fragments of steak sandwich from pudgy fingers. "What's this important experiment you want me to help you with?"

Kirkland stared grimly at his friend. J. Maurice Jones was fat. J. Maurice Jones, bachelor, insurance executive, and glutton, was a perfect five-by-five. His bulging clothing gave the impression of sacks, containing oil. As he chewed, his vast jowls quivered in not ungraceful rhythm like synchronized bowls of pink gelatine.

KIRKLAND jerked his head, and led the way back to the laboratory.

"Look at this," he said, handing Jones the tiny shotgun.

Jones looked. "Cute," he complimented. "I knew a fellow who had a watch charm that was a real little pistol and shot blank cartridges."

Kirkland scowled. "Jones," he said. "As you know, I've been working for years on an apparatus with which I hoped to shrink the molecules of matter. That's a real gun."

"What!" cried Jones, staring at the black cabinet, with eyes like blue saucers. "You mean you've succeeded—that this was a regular shotgun?"

"Use this pin," directed Kirkland. "Pull the trigger."

Jones grasped the diminutive walnut stock between his corpulent thumb and forefinger, inserted the pin that Kirkland had given him in the delicate trigger guard, and exerted pressure. Nothing happened.

"Jones!" said the professor cuttingly. "May I call your attention to the fact that the muzzle of that firearm is pointing directly at my midriff?"

Jones flushed, pointed the little gun at the plastered wall.

"Now, let me remind you that all modern shotguns have safety catches," said Kirkland.

Jones sheepishly flicked the tiny switch, reinserted the pin into the trigger guard, glanced uncertainly at Kirkland, and pressed the trigger.

There was a thin "spit!" A tiny puff of smoke spurted forth and microscopic pellets spattered against the wall. An empty shell case tinkled like a single brass-filing, to the floor.

"Great!" cried Jones in excitement. "Set us up a target, Dave."

Kirkland sighed, took the tiny gun, and replaced it on the table. "Come with me," he ordered, and returned to the living room. "Help me get that instrument to the laboratory," he directed.

Jones gaped. "Dave! You aren't going to shrink your wife's piano!"

"I must learn if my invention is effective on massive and heavy objects," explained Kirkland. "Don't you realize the import of my discovery, Jones? It will have a potential effect on the war? Once I succeed in solving the problem of restoring shrunken objects to their original size, the supplies for an Army could be sent overseas in a single transport plane, and there restored to normal bulk. Kindly help me with the piano, Jones."

Jones shrugged resignedly, waddled to the piano, and threw his weight against it. The heavy instrument seemed to leap ahead of its own volition, as if fearful of being enveloped by Jones' great mass. The journey down the hall and into the laboratory was accomplished with negligible damage to the piano, the walls, and Jones' physique.

Kirkland, guiding the forward end of the piano, called a halt before the black cabinet. Jones flopped down on a bench, where he wheezed moistly, like a telescoped whale.

The professor opened the door of the cabinet, and estimated that the piano would pass through the opening, with only a slight loss of varnish. Jones, urged into wheezing activity again, put his weight to the designated use, and, with much joint puffing and groaning, the piano was at length enclosed by the lead-lined walls of the cabinet.

At that moment, the doorbell rang shrilly.

"Telegram," guessed Kirkland. "Irene said she'd phone me as to her sister's condition." He wriggled past the piano, through the door, and, leaving Jones slumped wheezingly against the piano, went out of the room. He had guessed right. His wife, who

had gone to her sick sister's bedside two days before, informed him that her sister was better, but that she was going to stay on a few days, anyhow.

Kirkland composed a reply, and hurried back to the laboratory. The cabinet door was closed. Jones was nowhere in sight.

"He's gone to raid the ice-box, as usual," Kirkland mused bitterly. He moved to the cabinet, closed a knife-switch on the side.

The tubes flung a weird glow down from the top of the cabinet, and a low, moaning hum beat against the walls of the room.

AFTER waiting a few seconds, Kirkland opened the switch. The glow and hum died away. He stepped eagerly to the front, pressed a button on the door. The door swung smoothly open. Then, as his eyes focused on the floor of the cabinet, his heart came dangerously close to missing too many beats.

There, in the center of the cabinet floor, stood a tiny doll-piano, no larger than a gleaming rosewood jewel box. And, slouched in slumber across the piano's lid, was Jones. A Jones, still a perfect five-by-five, but now of inches, instead of feet.

With a horrified exclamation, Kirkland lunged into the cabinet, and dropped to his knees. Hesitantly, he extended his hand, and touched Jones' tiny shoulder.

Jones' eyelids fluttered, then two orbs like blue pinpoints stared at the walls of the cabinet which towered, comparatively, to the height of a skyscraper above his Lilliputian avoirdupois.

"Jones," groaned Kirkland. "Jones, old man!"

With the squeak of a terrified mouse, Jones stampeded from the cabinet, his scaled down, but still proportionately vast haunches jiggling frantically in their efforts to keep up with the rest of his speeding physique.

Kirkland followed miserably. Jones tore at the professor's trousers-cuffs which barely reached down as far as the manikin's somewhat less than five inch waist.

"Dave!" he shrieked wildly. "Why did you do your old friend like this? Why did you experiment on me, Dave?" His piping voice rose to the crescendo of a penny whistle.

Kirkland stared wretchedly down at the obese figure, whose fear and rage contorted features could have been engraved, life-size, on a postage stamp.

"Jones, I—I didn't know you were in there. I thought you had gone to the kitchen." His glance caught sight of the agitated curtains before the open window. "The breeze must have blown the door shut."

"I was tired from pushing that piano!" Jones bellowed. "I leaned across it to rest.

I must have dozed off. The next thing I knew, I was like this." He beat his fairly fist against Kirkland's ankle. "Well, let's get going. Put me back in the cabinet, and make me myself again."

"Jones, old fellow," Kirkland groaned. "I can't—it won't—"

"Why don't you hurry?" Jones shrieked wildly. His enraged squeaking changed in inflection, became appealing. "Why do you treat your old friend, this way, Dave? Why don't you restore my physique to me?" He clasped his pudgy little hands, and gazed piteously up at Kirkland's features, comparatively seventy feet above.

"Jones, I—I told you of what my invention would mean to the war, if I could discover the principle of restoring shrunken matter to its normal state," Kirkland said sorrowfully.

"If?" Jones bleated. "If?"

"I've not yet succeeded in reversing my machine," Kirkland explained sadly. "I can shrink matter, but it stays shrunk."

"Then what is to become of me?" Jones screeched. "Look at me, Dave! I can't weigh three pounds. And a few minutes ago, I weighed three hundred."

"I'll work night and day," promised Kirkland. "Surely I'll discover the principle of reversing the machine in a short time. A few months, perhaps."

"Months!" shrieked Jones, and burst into such a tirade of shrill blasphemy, that Kirkland recoiled, appalled. Then, abruptly, Jones' mood changed. He wilted, sat heavily down on the toe of the professor's shoe, and bowed his head to his hands.

"I'll never get my physique back," he groaned dismally. "I feel it in my bones."

"Nonsense, Jones," said Kirkland, without conviction. "I don't think you'll be—er—small very long. And now I think that some refreshments would cheer us both up. Will you permit me to carry you into the kitchen?"

With a frightened squawk, Jones erupted to his feet. Frantically, he jerked a miniature billfold from his pocket, fumbled some tiny bits of paper from a compartment, and held them up, with anger and dismay.

"My ration books!" he shouted despairingly. "They'll never honor them. I'll starve."

"Don't be silly," said the professor, patiently. "The scraps from my dinner would feed you a month. I'll see that you don't go hungry."

SOMEWHAT encouraged, Jones permitted himself to be conveyed to the kitchen in the palm of the professor's hand, and deposited on the table. He sat down on a soft bun which the professor provided for him,

and leaned wearily back against a sugar bowl.

He brightened considerably as he attacked fragments from a cold chicken drumstick as large as his thigh.

"Dave, being shrunk has certain points," he said greasily. "Mash me another pea, will you?"

Kirkland fascinatedly watched the glut-tonous manikin consuming food from a metal bottle cap which he was utilizing as a plate, conveying the mouthfuls to his lips by means of his sliver-like penknife.

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do, Jones," Kirkland said at length. "Today is Friday, so I have no physics classes until Monday. Tomorrow, we'll go to the proper offices and try to obtain priorities for some materials which I require to carry my molecule reduction experiments further. In the meantime, until I succeed in restoring your size, you may stay here. You can phone your office, and request a leave of absence. They can hardly refuse you."

Jones, sated and drowsy, nodded indifferently. He suffered himself to be transported to the living room, and placed upon a table. He requested a small cushion, lit a Lilliputian cigar, and stretched out with a sigh.

"Now, Dave, be a good fellow and mix us up a highball, will you?" he trebled, pointing to a squat bottle near his cushion.

"Jones!" the professor gasped in horror. "You're too small to drink!"

"Where do you get that stuff?" Jones demanded belligerently. "I'm forty-three years old, and—"

The doorbell cut him off. Wagging his finger warningly at Jones, Kirkland went to the door, opened it, and stepped quickly out to the porch, closing the door behind him, so that the bell-ringer might not spy the flaccid Jones on the table.

The bell-ringer was a squat, dark individual, with a face that somehow gave the impression of having been photographed many times above numbers. His hard, black eyes stared from beneath guilty brows, and his twisted mouth appeared as if accustomed to forming words directed at suspicious characters.

"My bus is broke down," he said in a tough voice. "I want to use your phone to call a pal."

Kirkland glanced nervously up and down the suburban street along which only a few widely-separated houses stared back at him with their yellow window-eyes.

"I—I don't see your car," he muttered uneasily.

"It's around the corner, on the State Highway," volunteered the dark man. "I was headed for Bishop City, on a job. I'm a locksmith. Gotta emergency call."

Kirkland swallowed. The phone was in the living room, not a yard from the table upon which Jones took his overstuffed ease.

"But—er—you see, I haven't a phone," he said.

"Say, don't any of you lugs in this suburb ever wanta call anybody up?" demanded the disappointed telephone-user in what seemed to Kirkland a threatening tone. "You're the third one that's told me they haven't gotta phone."

"Well—ah—priorities, you know," Kirkland said. He hesitated. "Tell you what I'll do. I'm somewhat of an amateur mechanic. I'll walk around the corner with you, and look at your machine."

The dark man accepted this as no more than his due.

He had let the ailing car's dying momentum carry it off the highway, behind a concealing signboard.

"Afraid some lug would cop my spare," he explained.

Kirkland's scientific mind solved the problem of the car's balkiness in five minutes.

"Your coil's burned out," he explained, thinking that even the dark man's car had a slinky and furtive look. "It happens that I have a spare coil in the house, if you care to go back for it."

The dark man cared. Kirkland bade him wait on the porch, opened the door, and stopped deadstill in stunned amazement.

JONES was drunk. By an ingenious arrangement of utilizing Kirkland's pen-staff for a lever, and a pencil for a fulcrum, he had succeeded in toppling the squat brown bottle over on its side. Then, with his penknife, he had hacked and hewn a minute opening in the cork, so that at intervals a drop of amber fluid welled from the aperture, hung quivering on the bottle-mouth for a tense instant, then dropped into Jones' cupped hands, and was conveyed drippingly to his drooling mouth.

"Jones!" exclaimed Kirkland in harsh disapproval. "This is disgusting."

Jones turned unsteadily, stood weaving in a puddle of Scotch.

"S'wunnerful bein' shrunksh," he babbled. "Quarta Scotch lash me a year. Pounda steak lash me—long time."

"You're drunk!" Kirkland accused harshly. "I'm surprised at you, Jones."

Jones hiccupped, swayed, smirked tolerantly up at Kirkland, and fell off the table.

With an exclamation of horror, Kirkland ran around to the side of the table. He gave a whoosh of relief as he saw that Jones had landed in a wastebasket, filled with wadded paper. The professor fished him out, and laid his sodden hulk back on the table. Only then did he realize that the sinister distressed

motorist had intruded, and was standing beside him. The dark man's hand seemed partial to proximity to that pocket in which are ordinarily carried handkerchiefs, flasks, bill-folds, or lethal weapons.

"What's that," the dark man demanded suspiciously. "Some kinda gag?"

Kirkland hesitated, rapidly estimating his unwelcome visitor's probable I.Q. Jones was self evident. His size was self evident. Only the cause of his diminutiveness could possibly be concealed from the unfriendly eyes of the dark man.

"This man is the victim of a rare affliction known to medical science as pituitarius reversus," Kirkland glibly explained. "After birth, instead of growing, he became smaller, until now in the prime of manhood, he is the pitiful specimen you see on that table. He's always been kept out of sight. Family pride, you know. He's a relative of mine."

The dark man digested this in silence for a moment.

"What's his racket?" he asked.

"Racket?" wondered the professor. "Oh, you mean his vocation. Why—he's a classical scholar. Too small to work, but has a private income, so devotes himself to literature."

The dark man's gaze shifted cynically to the squat bottle which Kirkland had righted, then returned to Jones' reeking hulk. He extended a hairy finger, prodded Jones' tiny, globular paunch.

"He devotes himself to littature, liquids, and solids," stated the dark man, then narrowed his eyes in thought.

Kirkland swallowed nervously. It was obvious that the dark man was no locksmith as he averred—at least not the sort that is invited with confidence into business institutions and wealthy homes, to open refractory vaults, safes and strongboxes. In fact, Kirkland thought uncomfortably, upon the rumoured approach of this alleged locksmith, heavy trunks, chests and articles of furniture would logically be piled against doors.

The professor glanced wishfully but hopelessly at the means of communication with, among other things, the police. He became aware that his sinister visitor was speaking:

"I think you're lying about why he's such a runt, but that don't matter. What does matter, is that he's a runt, and I can use him in my racket."

"You're no locksmith—you're a burglar or something!" Kirkland exclaimed indignantly, "Jones is a decent citizen."

"Quiet!" snapped the dark man. At that moment, his gaze alighted on the telephone. "No phone, huh?" he remarked sternly.

Kirkland maintained silence.

A revolver appeared in the dark man's hand. "Get that coil, and let's get going," he ordered. "I'll carry the runt."

"This is abduction!" Kirkland exclaimed angrily. "I won't submit to it."

The doorbell made him jump.

The dark man started nervously, then waved his revolver, and darted to the concealment of heavy draperies across the entrance to a sun-porch.

"Answer it, but don't step outside!" he warned. "Wait! Hide that runt." The menacing muzzle of his revolver, protruding through the draperies, gave emphasis to his words.

THE professor obeyed. He snatched the alcoholized Jones from the table, glanced helplessly about for a likely place of concealment, then, goaded by the low but bitter voice of the invisible but harshly-audible dark man, stuffed Jones into his coat-pocket, and hurried to the door.

He opened it, and a group of merry-makers surged in, like a wave, with loud cries.

"We thought of you all alone since Irene went away!" bellowed Arthur Daly, one of Kirkland's colleagues at the university.

"So we all left the party, and came out to cheer you up!" screeched his voluminous wife, Myrtle.

"Anything for a pal," chimed in Kirkland's dentist, Horace Jordan, and his voluble wife, Dorothy.

In a confused and apprehensive state, Kirkland glanced from the two boisterous couples, to the draperies behind which he could sense threats and curses being with difficulty suppressed.

"Uh—huh, glad you came," he said weakly.

"Well, what say we have some refreshments?" sang out Arthur Daly, and headed towards the kitchen.

"Sit down and tell me about your experiments, Dave," gushed Myrtle Daly, pulling Kirkland to the couch beside her. "Arthur says that you don't do anything but fool around in that laboratory of yours."

Kirkland stammered a few halting phrases. The draperies across the room occasionally moved slightly. Something else moved slightly. Jones, airless, was beginning to stir in his pocket. Now he was squirming, undoubtedly seeking oxygen.

Glancing furtively down at his side, Kirkland was horrified to see Jones' bloated little features suddenly appear over the top of his pocket, and bleakly survey what surroundings were in view, which consisted mainly of the expansive hip of Myrtle Daly, not two inches from his jaundiced eye.

Hastily, Kirkland placed his thumb on Jones' polished little pate, and shoved him back into the pocket. A string of drunken invectives issued thinly through the muffling cloth.

"Why, Dave!" exclaimed Myrtle, in indig-

nant surprise. "What's come over you?"

Kirkland ground his teeth. Just then, Horace and Dorothy, who had been dialing the radio, came over and plopped down on the couch, shoving Kirkland up against Myrtle Daly.

Jones, compressed, began kicking and struggling mightily for elbow room. Myrtle, believing herself pawed, turned an angry and indignant face toward Kirkland, then leaped to her feet with a piercing shriek.

"He stuck me!" she screeched, rubbing her hip. "He stuck me with a pin!"

"I—I—" Kirkland began foolishly, but he was drowned by a flood of unfavorable criticism from the quartet, Arthur Daly having rushed in from the kitchen.

"It's below you, Dave," muttered Horace Jordan as he followed the others out. The door slammed contemptuously.

Kirkland angrily stabbed his hand into his pocket, yanked Jones out. Jones still clasped the penknife with which he had won his elbow room.

"You miserable little wretch!" growled Kirkland, beside himself. "Are you trying to alienate all of my friends?"

"She mashed me!" squeaked Jones. "I could feelsh my ribsh cracking."

"Cut it!" snarled a menacing voice, and the dark man's wrathful face appeared from behind the draperies. "Are both you lugs trying to queer me?" He spun the cylinder of his thirty-eight, looked at his watch. "It's too late to go to my bus, now. The state cops might ask questions. We'll stay here till day-break."

What remained of the night passed slowly for Kirkland. Jones snored suddenly on the table. The dark man, who had offered information to the effect that he could be called "Locks", occupied himself with regaling Kirkland with his crime-laden plans regarding Jones. Jones was to squeeze through many narrow apertures, and be lowered through many transoms and tug the keys from many locks. Kirkland occupied himself with cursing the day that Jones had forced insurance policies and friendship upon him.

AT LENGTH broke the gruesome dawn. Jones, the diminutive but no less suffering victim of a frightful hangover, snapped and snarled endlessly as Kirkland, following the sullen Locks' orders, prepared breakfast. But he became less virulent after gulping a spoonful of scrambled egg, and a thimble of coffee.

"Now, this is what you lugs are gonna do," said Locks, who had eaten with his revolver beside his plate. "I'll take you for a little spin in the country, professor, and leave you where you can't squeal to the cops till me

and the runt's in safe waters. Then you're on your own."

Kirkland paled. In Locks' eyes was that which called his voice a liar. Pictures of roadside ditches filled with riddled bodies suddenly monopolized Kirkland's mind.

He started to speak, when Jones piped up defiantly.

"You're crazy if you think I'm going with you! Do I look like a criminal?"

"Cut it, squirt, or I'll pinch your head off!" snarled Locks. He swept Jones from the table, dumped him roughly on the floor. "Get the rest of your clothes, and make it snappy!"

Jones glared at him, then turned and rushed from the kitchen, hurling defiance over his shoulder. Cursing, Locks started after him, then halted, and motioned the professor to precede. They followed the faint sound of Jones' fleeing feet through the dining room, thence into the hall, and saw him vanish into the laboratory, like a ball of butter with legs.

Forced to obey, Kirkland followed. Locks glanced suspiciously at the scientific apparatus, squinted accusingly at the black cabinet.

"So this is where you made him a runt, somehow!" he said. He turned his attention to his quarry. Jones was nowhere in sight.

Locks snatched a coil of insulated wire from a peg, bound Kirkland's hands tightly behind his back, then forced him to lie down on the floor, and securely fastened his crossed ankles.

"Now, I'll find the little rat," he promised grimly, and began a painstaking search for likely hiding places for Jones. He delved under benches, poked into boxes, and behind batteries and transformers.

"I'll squash the little squirt when I find him!" he threatened, and snarled a string of threats and ultimatums for the benefit of the invisible though doubtlessly listening and quaking Jones.

Kirkland, lying painfully on the floor, suddenly became tense. As Locks, working toward the rear, approached a corner, Jones, tiptoeing with elaborate stealth, emerged from an empty carton, and, taking advantage of Locks' looking the other way, attempted to bypass him.

But Jones' bulk proved his undoing. He misjudged the distance between Locks' foot and the wall, and, in attempting to ease his corpulence through the intervening space, became stuck.

Locks, feeling the movement, glanced, then swooped down on the fugitive with a triumphant oath. But just as his hand touched Jones, he gave a yelp of pain, and jerked away.

Jones, red-stained penknife in hand, scuttled madly towards the door. With a mad-dened snarl, Locks jerked up his gun, and

fired. The bullet thudded into the floor, an inch from Jones' frantically pumping legs, showered him with splinters, which, to him, were like stovewood.

Helplessly, Kirkland watched the squealing manikin stampede into the hall, with Locks in enraged pursuit. Then, from the respective rooms of the house, came the destructive sounds of the chase. The clatter of shattering crockery, and the crash of overturned furniture, mingled with the furious curses of the pursuer, and the terrified squeaks of the pursued.

Kirkland's frantic eyes focused on the open door of the black cabinet, and a thrill of hope was like pain.

"Jones!" he bellowed at the top of his voice. "Try to make your way back here!"

He repeated his urgings, and presently approaching squealing gave indication that Jones was plummeting down the hall. Then Jones shot through the doorway.

"He's got me, Dave." the quivering manikin gasped, sagging against Kirkland's face. "I—I kept away from him, under the beds and furniture, but I'm all in."

"Into the cabinet—quick!" barked Kirkland, as Locks burst into the laboratory.

JONES stood not on the order of his going. With a final bubbling squeal of terror, he scooted into the cabinet, missing a vicious kick from Locks' toe, by so narrow a margin that the disturbed air gave him an added burst of speed.

Snarling, Locks lunged into the cabinet. Instantly, Kirkland jerked his feet beneath him, and with a sort of fish-like flop that almost fractured his spine, threw himself to his feet.

Then, as Locks, hearing the noise, whirled from his efforts to corner the shrieking Jones in the cabinet, Kirkland gave a tremendous hop, and slammed himself against the door.

Then, to the accompaniment of Locks' startled blows against the cabinet's interior, he hopped around to the side where the switch was located. Spurred by his visualization of Jones trembling in a corner of the darkened cabinet, he backed against the gleaming plastic, and strained his hands upward for the switch. But he could not reach it. Desperately he forced his arms up until his shoulders cracked as if he were being questioned by the gestapo, but the shiny black handle of the switch remained separated from his quivering fingertips by an inch of space which might have been a light year.

From the cabinet came the muffled sounds of Locks hurling himself against the door, and a ghastly picture of a flattened and reddened Jones imprinted itself upon Kirkland's brain. He bit his lip in agonized frustration, and the pain shocked his mind to a realization of the

connection between his lip and his mouth.

Cursing himself, he twisted around, caught the handle of the knife-switch between his teeth, and with a jerk of his head, closed the switch.

The tubes atop the cabinet glowed weirdly, the moaning hum drowned out Locks' muffled sounds of forcible exit. Kirkland waited a few seconds that were a few millenniums, then opened the switch.

As the glow and hum died away, he hopped around to the front. Here, he did not waste time in an attempt to strain his tortured arms up to the button, but simply butted it with his skull. The door swung open against him, upsetting his precarious balance, and toppling him heavily to the floor. Groaning, he managed to regain his feet, just as two struggling figures, locked in straining, cursing combat, reeled from the cabinet, and across the floor.

One figure, Locks, now shrunken to the size of a frothing and blasphemous doll. The other figure, Jones, but a changed Jones. A ferocious, slaving Jones, who, now that his persecutor was more nearly his own size, was bent on vengeance of a violent nature.

Locks was taller and more muscular. But the chase had told on his dissipated squatness, as much so as on Jones' vast physique. Also Jones made up in sheer volume, what he lacked in muscular tissue. His very weight was a drain on Locks' strength.

The two Lilliputian gladiators reeled against a table leg, and fell to the floor. Locks was underneath. His breath went out in a thin wish, but he recovered, and strained his squat body in an effort to roll the gross Jones over.

And now Kirkland saw that Jones' pudgy hand desperately gripped the wrist of Locks, who still clutched his revolver, now a tiny, glittering sliver, which nevertheless held death for one of Jones' stature.

Kirkland frantically hopped around the battle, seeking an opportunity to help Jones, but the two entwined figures were as if cast from one very small mould.

Suddenly, Locks, exerting all the strength in his powerful little legs, jerked up his knees, and kicked Jones bodily off of him. Jones sprawled groggily and flabbily on the floor. Locks scrambled to his feet, raised his revolver. Kirkland gave a despairing hop, and his foot knocked Locks violently across the floor.

Kirkland, off balance, stumbled into a table, and crashed violently to the floor. A hot knife of pain ripped into his spine, and he cried out involuntarily. The table toppled over, its contents scattering over the floor. There was a thin *spit!* and something burned Kirkland's calf. Dazedly, he stared at the miniature automatic shotgun which he

had placed on the table the day before.

His glance whipped to the combatants. Locks, still gripping his revolver, was struggling to his feet. Jones, his tiny rolls of fat streaming perspiration like rain, was raising himself groaningly to his knees. His bulging pinpoints of eyes were fixed in horror on the weapon in Locks' vengeful hand.

DESPERATELY Kirkland tried to rise, but the pain in his spine anchored him to the floor. Wobblingly, Locks raised his gun.

"Jones!" shouted Kirkland. "The shotgun! Behind you!"

Jones floundered around. His terror-stricken eyes saw the miniature weapon on the floor. With a frantic bleat, he dived towards it.

He snatched it up, just as Locks fired. The infinitesimal bullet seared Jones' hip. He shrieked, swished around, jerked up the shotgun, and fired simultaneously with Locks' second shot.

The two faint spits were as one. Locks' tiny features were obliterated by a flowing curtain of red. Jones dropped the shotgun, clasped his fairy hands to his paunch, and collapsed, with a miniature crash to the floor.

"Jones!" Kirkland sobbed. "Jones, old fellow!"

From the front came the sound of loud voices, and the pound of official knuckles on the door.

"Back here!" Kirkland called weakly, and heard heavy feet approaching down the hall.

"Somebody reported a shot," said a policeman in the doorway, then he stopped and stared at the two goymanikins on the floor...

Two weeks later, Kirkland sat in a hospital room, and beamed at J. Maurice Jones. Jones, at ease in a bed of surgical cotton in a cardboard box on the dresser, was eating a steak as large as a half-dollar.

"Yes, my spine had a dislocated vertebrae," Kirkland was explaining. "But that isn't important. You, Jones. You say you'll be out of here in two weeks?"

Jones nodded. "That's what the docs say."

Kirkland waited until a nurse wearing a strained look had brought the diminutive patient a teaspoonful of vanilla pudding, then spoke warmly.

"You're a hero, Jones. That Locks was wanted for everything from burglary to murder."

Jones modestly ate his pudding.

Kirkland's face clouded. "I hated to have to tell you, Jones, that, after examining fully into my molecule shrinking principle, the academy of science convinced me that it is impossible to restore the once shrunken molecules of matter to their former size. You—you'll always be small, Jones."

Jones burped. "Think nothing of it, Dave," he said, wiping pudding from his lips. "The ration board has decided that there is no legal basis upon which they can refuse to honor my ration books in full."



Coming in the Next Issue

DEAD CITY

A Novelet of an Alien Civilization

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Plus Many Other Stories and Features



The big man shoved, tearing him loose from the ship

ROCKET SKIN

By RAY BRADBURY

Hitch-hiking through space, clamped magnetically to the skin of a rocket ship, George Vanning finds his companions are—espionage, death, and murder!

FEAR made him forget.
"How do you hold to a rocket?"
shouted George Vanning, rushing
through cold space.

"With your magnetics! Watch me! Like

this!" cried Old Pop, like a vulture in armor.

The rocket belly hung over them. They
were silver children hurtling to suckle its
metal, to be nursed on duralloy and to be
flung across the universe.

"What if I miscalculate?" George asked, fearfully.

"The jet-flame will eat you!" shouted the ancient hitch-hiker, still speeding.

CLANG!

"I've hit!" yelled George.

"Magnetics!" somebody ordered swiftly.

Thirteen men hit the hard rocket and dangled with magnetics juiced full, George Vanning among them. The rocket's acceleration quadrupled with a shuddering gout of flame. The rocket quivered and George quivered in sympathy.

The asteroids dropped away like exploded buckshot. Stars shone out all around. Another hitch-hiker swam up out of the dark sky ocean and strove to connect. George screamed him on. The man failed. He dove straight into the river of jet-flame!

The rocket was now mother to thirteen frightened, semi-frightened and casual children. Inside his bulger helmet, eating his air supply like an oxygen dinner, George Vanning felt his heart shaking out a loud rhythm. His eyes were wide in a pallid face.

His gun holster had been emptied by all the confusion and shrieking and fury of flight. He grabbed its emptiness with one free hand. An Interplanetary Patrol officer needed his pistol as he needed air. He was not through with fear yet, and he was on his way across millions of cool miles toward green-glowing Earth, twelve other men grouped in various positions about him, sweating salt and gasping thanks to the star-gods that they had safely contacted the Big Skin. They were pimples on it.

One of these hitch-hikers was a man George Vanning was seeking. Which one? He did not know yet. He was too cold with fright to know or care.

George cupped his heart with compressed lungs to hold its wild pounding. He had flown inside ships for ten of his thirty years, but this was his first jaunt outside where the meteors could mush you into orange jelly.

The huddled shapes flickered in uneasy light. Hitch-hikers, thousands of them, plying the space tides week on week, year on year. Think of it! The dangerous pastime and adventure of moneyless men and a few gaunt hard women.

And one of them, George's eyes narrowed and searched, was carrying back to Earth valuable military data, locked by psycho-

impregnation into his completely unaware brain!

HE RELAXED his long thin muscles. His blue gloves and heavy boots were sealed safely to the hull. Now, with the men collected on either side of him, there was the long dark ahead, and his job to do.

Earth and Venus shone like stop-and-go lights far away. They did not, at this distance, looked poised for combat. But war between them might explode any day now. Venusian citizens, however, were still unrestricted visitors to Mars and the asteroids, and while other communicative channels were forbidden them, they were shuttling valuable information back to Venus, and their secret agents on Earth, via some of the hitch-hikers' brains. On Earth and on Venus, these brains could be psychoanalyzed by their waiting scientists.

George adjusted himself in his hitch-hiker's disguise. In these last days of peace, Earth was conducting its military investigations in secret, so as not to impair diplomatic accord. It was up to himself, and men like him, riding other rocket Skins, to find and prevent the leakage of valuable detail. Peace itself might very well depend on their actions these next few weeks.

Shouts from the audio-phones broke his thoughts apart. Somebody screamed. George twisted.

One greenhorn was clinging to the Skin with only one magnetic claw. He struggled to complete connections with feet and free hand. But acceleration was ripping him loose.

"Help! Help me!" he shouted. "I'll fall! I'll burn!"

A bigger man lunged ponderously at the greenhorn, bellowing.

"Keep away!" The big man shoved. "Don't grab!"

"I can't hold! I'll die!"

"Die then!" The big man kicked. The generator bulge on the greenhorn's chrysalis collapsed in blue sizzling sparks.

The greenhorn vanished instantly. Torn loose like a stamp from its envelope, he fell back in space and, shrouded in flame-drift, was burnt to a silent cinder.

Wordlessly, the hitch-hikers shifted inside their space-suits. They eyed the big man fearfully, angrily. They edged off around the rim of their tiny rocket world.

The big man swung a menacing fist.

"Nobody come near me! Nobody!"

George Vanning tightened in his shell. He forgot he was not on the ground. He knew only anger which stamped out the fear that had been in him.

"You shouldn't have done that, big man," he said.

THE big man stared at George and beyond him, his face circular and sun-burnt and peeling. It was a young face with old eyes in it, a big face on a big man.

"Why that fellow tried to peel me off," he asserted indignantly. "It was either him or me."

"We don't want your kind riding the Skin with us," George said.

To himself, he thought: Is this the gent I'm searching for? Are the military plans sewed invisibly in his brain so even he himself doesn't know they're there? Just a lot of small dark thoughts floating in his subconscious!

The big man's lips fluttered.

"I couldn't let that hysterical greenhorn kill me, could I?" he demanded.

Hot silence answered him.

Somewhere, somebody sobbed. George squinted to see who, and found it hard to find the body to fit the voice sucking and blowing in the phones. The sobbing sounded young and high. Fresh as green grass and yellow flowers.

He found the face, about fifteen yards up the hull, held tight in its vapor-jar. A raw young kid, thin as starlight, and no more than eighteen, was staring at the rocket flames and making tears.

"Shut up!" stormed the big man. "I can't stand crying!"

Another figure moved like a slow spider, starlight flickering from crucifixes that were welded to his shoulders and helmet. George recognized the familiar emblem of the space-philosopher, one of those lean, patient men who searched the starways year upon year, thinking their deep thoughts. This one reached the sobbing boy and comforted him with an arm, speaking softly.

"Stop it, both of you!" ordered the big man. "I'm sorry I shoved the greenhorn off. I'm sorry, I tell you! Now forget it!"

"Who're you to give orders?" someone snapped.

The big man glared.

"Who said that?" he demanded.

But there was only silence. There was no way of telling who had spoken. Finding no one, the big man fastened the blame on

George Vanning. George began to sweat and want his gun back, very badly.

The big man looked at him, calmly, with decision, as if he had a sad job to do, but couldn't avoid doing it. He crawled slowly forward, toward George.

"Look everybody!" said George. "We've eleven against his one! Let's stick together. Let's act together, now!"

But nobody moved.

George swallowed thickly. The big man crawled closer.

"Look everybody," George pleaded, "this is our world the next five days. We can't contact those inside the ship, and so it's up to us—"

The big man released juice in one magnetic claw to shift it, put it down, gave it juice, arched his body caterpillarwise up, with power off in his midriff belt, then down again with power on. Next, his bulging blue legs moved, off power, on power.

They had an audience, George and the big man. Faces, upside down, sideways, were tensed and waiting.

The big man delicately snaked out a fist. "Nobody stops me from going down to green Earth," he blustered. "I've got to go. Got to see the sun, warm and round as a yellow egg, and I've got to feel it hit me, hot, yellow, good." The big pink face looked for the molecule of sun, longed for it yearningly, and came down to George Vanning again. "And you're against me. You don't want me to go to Earth!"

He was very close to George.

"What's your name, big man?" George asked in a breath.

"Ellis," said the man, still coming.

"Well, look here, Ellis. You take another step and I'll kick your helmet face in!"

That stopped Ellis.

"Think it over." George made it brotherly. "You won't live two seconds with your mask shattered, mister."

Ellis thought it over. He sort of whimpered, then he sighed and collapsed against the hull wearily.

Everybody relaxed. Everybody clung to rocket skin, exhaling in relief, swearing softly. George and Ellis lay quietly.

A pounding jolt and a scream shocked them.

George tilted his head. So did Ellis. Up where there'd been a man on the prow was now a gleaming wet smudge and a dint in metal.

A meteor!

The philosopher knew what should be done.

"We'd better move down to the after-ferrel, where it's safe," he said in his quiet way. "The meteors will be thick as a slab of sin from here on, men."

Nobody argued.

Ellis was first among the yelling, scuttling men, chancing the momentum and acceleration that could pluck them off at a thousand miles per hour and shower them away into torches. Like frantic crawfish they wriggled down the Skin, slowly gaping at space, cursing, aware that the meteors coming at them could hammer and crush their brains and heels into one mess.

He'd been ten minutes on a rocket skin, thought George, and it felt like ten years!

A VOICE spoke.

"I'm frozen! I can't move!" it said.

George Vanning recognized it. It belonged to the young greenhorn, the raw kid who had sobbed at seeing death. George turned. The philosopher was trying to help the kid move, but not succeeding.

"One hand at a time, my son," cautioned the philosopher. "One hand, and then the other, then your feet and mid-riff belt. Have faith, my son. Slowly now."

The young kid wore a bright new shiny bulger—an expensive one. A rich kid, no doubt, with adventurous ideas, run away from his papa's summer home on Mars.

The philosopher looked to George.

"You can help," he said. "You're an old hand at this."

George laughed.

"Has ten minutes of it aged me?" But he nudged the kid and asked his name, crawling up beside him to help.

"Tetley," stuttered the kid. "I can't move." His eyes tightened convulsively, his lips shivered. "I don't dare try to move. I don't want to die!"

A meteor flashed by, close as a breath. The blood pounded in George's neck.

"Look, Tetley," he said, grimly. "Did you ever mash a bug when you were a kid? Well, in about thirty seconds, if we don't move, a meteor will come walking by, and we'll be bugs. We'll look like a big scarlet symbol stamped on the ship's nub when she floats into Earth port. People'll squint up and say, 'They got a new coat-of-arms on the Rocket today.' Want them to say that, Tetley?"

Tetley moved.

"Take to it slow," whispered George, en-

couragingly. "A foot at a time. You'll be okay."

The three of them shifted like pawns in a chess game down the hull.

"Deacon," said George to the philosopher in sudden curiosity, "what are you doing out here, a billion miles from church?"

The philosopher looked straight ahead.

"This is the biggest darn cathedral I ever saw," he said, "and I didn't have to build it, praise the Lord!"

They laughed. They had to laugh at something, or go crazy.

The philosopher was looking at the stars.

"Look!" he said. "All the candles are lighted, and the black nuns of space are at benediction, dark and quiet, unmoving in their worship between the flames."

A meteor punctuated his sentence by striking the ship like a gong, just above them. The meteor sped on. George's heart went with it and came crashing back. He looked at Tetley and the Deacon, still crawling slowly, and he wondered if either of them held in his skull the secret for which he was searching. He'd have to find out.

"Pretty speaking, Deacon," he said.

The meteors poured down like a rain. But the men were safe now, in the after-ferrel.

Crouched under the protecting wing of the after-ferrel, big Ellis was a lonely man. No one lay within twenty yards of him.

George and the philosopher and young Tetley settled as far as possible above the huge, gushing channel of flame coming from the many jets.

Old Pop, the vulture-like ancient with a grey beard tucked into his visor, commented bitterly, as he settled his bones.

"Kept arguin' like fools up there when we shoulda been running!" he said. "All because of Ellis, another of us gets stomped on!"

Meteors raked the ship, plunging across its epidermis, giant fingers questing, skimming, stroking past, invisible until after they had passed on.

Most of the veteran hoboes lay near George Vanning, their faces gnarled, wrinkled, beaten by space, burnt by the sun, paled by the void-depths, thinned by years, veined by liquor, made feverish by desires on far stars. Their suits were age-crusted, battered, their bulger glass speckled, chipped and sanded thin by meteor dust. Is it one of them I'm looking for, George thought, one of these silent, easy men who takes the voyage as calmly as the sun shining?

But the meteors held his thoughts in abeyance. Watching the dark things fly by just out at arm's length, he didn't care about Earth or Venus or wars or military data or who carried it. He only thought of living.

HE LISTENED, and the only sound was this the breathing of these men taking life this second, this moment, this hour. That and their heartpulses, drumming faintly over the audios now, but ready to burst into thunder at the slightest warning.

He was one with them. The rocket gave them purpose. All of them. Even Ellis! Let the rich dames ride inside this can, doling out four thousand credits for the privilege. Give a hard man four credits of food, two of oxygen, a credit's whiskey and water, half a credit of propulsive and magnetics, and he was ready to skip from Jupiter to Mercury and back, hop-scooting the asteroids. Cheap travel! What did they care if one out of three of them became a death statistic by the year's end!

Well, these star-hardened men began now to rail at Ellis, call him names, reveal their plans for him. Big Ellis clung trembling, silent, listening. It was apparent Ellis was an outsider, not of their type, and was not to be sustained by them.

Old Pop led the chastising.

"We've got a code of ethics, Ellis," the bearded man said bitterly. "In space, everything's against a man. He needs all the helping he can get!"

"We're going to get you, Ellis!" said another.

"We'll wait until you sleep, or try to sleep."

"Then we'll rip you off, and send you back where you belong!"

"Spread your atoms from here to the Moon!"

George Vanning listened, and figured. Which of these men was the most logically guilty of being the information agent? A man like the Deacon, quiet, gentle, unassuming? Young kid Tetley? Old Pop or the others? George's glance always returned to Ellis. Ellis, the outcast who didn't want to kill, but had killed.

Ellis, with an urge so strong to see the sun, was a perfect carrier for any message. His motive was strongest. He seemed to be going somewhere. The others were casual, easy men, who did not fight or kill to be hitch-hikers, and they respected each other's rights. The Venusians would not pick such

casual men to entrust their data to. To be certain the stuff would smash through and not be diverted by ethics or fumbling, they would utilize a big man like Ellis with his big motives and his big strength.

The pounding of meteors continued. They thrashed, beat about the ship.

"Gentlemen, think of it," the philosopher said. "Beneath this welded dermis of the ship, peace, law, and order are almost in reach." He shook his head. "A few inches inward, someone strolls the ship's corridor, uncramped, talking quietly, unworried, maybe smoking a cigarette."

More meteors rained by, striking again with their sound like great gongs being beaten.

"Maybe holding a woman," piped Old Pop, wickedly.

"Maybe," said the philosopher, his eyes shining with thought. "Two worlds, gentlemen, each with its own character. Comfort on one side, agony the other. What a difference an inch of metal makes!"

Old Pop saw a hunk of metal wing by. "Reminds me, I'd like a chew of tobacco," he whined.

"If you think about it, about how our lives depend on so many variables," said the philosopher. "Oxygen—"

Quickly, everyone checked oxygen-cans to see the contents. Eyes were squinted. Lips were licked.

"Food."

Gloves fumbled with dehydrated packets snapped to belts.

"Magnetics."

George Vanning happily saw his electrometer-dial shiver high.

The philosopher listed more variables that chilled the blood:

"The pilot of this ship who sometimes takes a cocky notion to shake loose his outside family."

In the tense silence, they waited for the pilot to take a notion.

But the pilot apparently was a nice gent. Nothing happened.

Some of the men slept. Amidst grinding chaos, they snored softly in their phones. If death came in five seconds or five hours, they didn't want to know. They were tired of waiting for it.

One of the sleeping men vanished.

He didn't say good-by. We didn't even know he was going. His magnetics petered out unexpectedly and he floated away, still dreaming, into a deeper, fiercer slumber.

George's stomach jerked hard in him. That empty area before him a moment ago had sustained a man! Whew!

DAYS passed as slowly as the stars wheeling around the all-encompassing sky. There wasn't a thing to do but keep your head down, shift position carefully, suck your food through a special tube arrangement, and dole out your precious little water. That, and talk. Talk and probe the other men to reveal their personalities, their living, their hopes and goals.

George Vanning compared them to Ellis, sized them up. Men named Simpson and Geneer and Schmidt and Haines and Johnson. Ellis was still being ignored steadfastly. He didn't bother anyone, and nobody bothered him. Even if they ganged up on him, one of them would be likely to fall off the rocket and be eaten up, in order to loosen Ellis. None of them chose to do so. But they were figuring a way.

They got to talking about their experiences, as if they were about a warm campfire.

"I thought this would be fun," Tetley said, like the green kid he was. "I'd heard about space-skinners for years, how they worked, what they did, and I—I thought I'd try it. I'm sorry. I'd give anything to be swimming in a Martian canal right now, I would, oh how I would!"

The others laughed good-naturedly. They had to take turns talking. Everybody could hear what everyone else said, including burps and hiccups. There was no privacy in any conversation, no matter what it was. Sometimes, everybody talked at once, and their voices collided. Then they laughed and there was silence. Everyone waited for someone else to speak the next word. Nobody would volunteer.

"Well, somebody say something!" someone would prompt, and then they'd be off again.

Old Pop talked through his whiskers.

"Me, I been bucking rockets for years," he said. "Some of my best friends are cinders."

Laughter greeted his remark.

"I hitch-hike up to Jupiter," he went on, "and I mine uranium. I fall down to Mercury and collect gewgaws. I buck over to Venus and dig rommalu crystals. Why, man, I wouldn't stick on the ground if you gave it to me!"

Slim Jenks, an ore-slinger with a celery-

stalk neck and pouched blue eyes, had been wolf-howling the asteroids fifteen years now, he reckoned.

"I like women-folks," he said. "Tall ones, short ones. Ones with four arms, five legs and in assorted colors from pink-furry to blue Martian ones."

Everybody spoke. There was talk of hard, pulsing years, the old days, the first tubs, the greenhorns, the hobo camps on the dim asteroids.

Ellis watched, eyes gleaming, mouth working like a kid. He waited until they all had spoken and then he wet his lips.

"I—" he began.

"Shut up!" snarled Old Pop.

"I—"

"You heard me! Blast you, shut up!"

"Let him talk," George Vanning interposed. "I want to hear his story."

Old Pop subsided after objecting some more, and Ellis, with almost a grateful nod at George, started out.

"I been cold a long time," he said. "I was born and raised on Pluto. My sun was a Christmas tree ornament way up on the top of the great branches of space, where it was small and I couldn't touch or feel or hardly see it." His voice was wistful now. "You know how it is, you understand, don't you? I—I've never seen Earth. I've heard about it. You men, you've known it all your lives. You've known the real sun, the big, round, yellow sun. My sun was withered, a pin-prick, cold and removed. I was cold every day and every day and every day."

The monotone rose and fell. A shiver traveled up George's neck, and he closed his eyes as he listened to the rest of it.

"So I worked," Ellis went on. "I saved my money. And I hitch-hiked down the stars—from Pluto to Neptune, Neptune to Jupiter, Jupiter to Mars, and here I am, after all those millions of miles, all those long cold years of traveling, and I killed a man. But I didn't want to, and I don't know why I did it, and"—his voice went off into a hoarse whisper—"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Nobody spoke.

"You men," Ellis whispered the rest of it. "You take the sun for granted, take it or leave it. But just seeing green grass once, just once, is all I want in life. That's why I'm traveling. That's why, I guess, I killed a man."

"Did you stay on Mars long?" George Vanning asked.

"A week."

"See any Venusians there?"

"A couple. One night, I was drinking. I passed out. Why?"

"Nothing," said George.

Nothing, except that Ellis was the man he wanted, he thought. Nothing whatsoever except that! Nothing except that he and Ellis must float down to Earth together, and that nothing must separate them. Not these men and their planned vengeance, nor flame, nor meteors, nor anything else. If Ellis became a cinder now, the evidence would be destroyed. It must be brought intact to the Earth officials.

A little game began to be played. Old Pop started it out, and Schmidt and Johnson and the others joined.

"So you like the sun, Ellis?"

"Pretty, pretty sun. Pretty pretty!"

Ellis did not shout back at them, but turned his eyes upward toward the brilliant, expanding, solar orb.

MORE days passed. The men kept at their game with Ellis, taunting him about the pretty, pretty sun. He did not answer, but looked for solace at the warm round ball of fire in the void.

George Vanning slept fitfully. Finally, exhausted, on the sixth day, he fell into a deep slumber.

He was wakened abruptly by shouting. There was a change of motion and weight. He glanced fearfully back. He grinned at what he saw. The tail of the rocket was cut. The flame ribbon was gone!

"The power's off!" croaked Old Pop. "It's off!"

"Earth!" Tetley was smiling for the first time. "Look at it!"

Earth was big, surrounding them almost to the limit of their seeing, and beyond it was the sun! The rocket was preparing to land.

There was a tremendous adjusting, stirring, reacclimation of blue-bulgers, and of the bodies sweat-caked inside them. The men were like locusts warming to life after seventeen years in the dark rich space loam. The Earth molded solid all dreams, wishes and plans!

And then Ellis' voice beat upon the excitement.

"Earth?" he stumbled. "Where's Earth?" Everybody shut up.

"What's wrong, mister?" Old Pop grinned.

"Where's Earth?" Ellis said it again.

"Where—where are the stars? The sun!"

George stared at him, unbelievably. The man was joking! He had to be.

"The sun's right up there," Tetley said, grinning. "See it? And the Earth, too. And you can still make out a few stars."

Everybody agreed, shaking heads, laughing. George Vanning's blood pulsed cold.

Ellis raised one metal-fingered glove, extending it as if to touch something not quite tangible.

"Where?" he husked. And a moment later, eyes wide, "Where's everybody!"

"Here, around you," retorted the philosopher worriedly.

"I can't—see anything," Ellis replied, choking. "I'm blind!"

"Right on schedule," said Old Pop, a grin spreading apart his beard. "Just like I figured. Just the way we wanted it. Well, you were lookin' for the sun, mister. Did you find it good?"

"I'm blind," gasped Ellis. "You—"

"You should have known better than to look too long at the sun in space, mister," Pop said. "Bad for the eyes. That was the general idea of us pokin' fun at you about it. The more we giped, the more you looked! Bingo. You're blind! Well, bye-bye, mister, sure nice to have known you!"

"You can't leave me here," pleaded Ellis. "I can't see."

He was pushed out of focus by the emergency of the next few moments. The rustling of gloves, the gasp of breath through clenched teeth, the preparation for getting away from the mother Skin—all of that drowned out his pleading.

George Vanning lay against the ship with cold hatred for these men in him. They had deliberately irritated Ellis into exposing his eyes! They had done that, and now they were leaving. They had said they would get Ellis, and now they would get him, simply by leaving him alone on the ship as they fell away.

"Let's get movin'!" shouted Old Pop.

Toggles were unsealed. Feet were pushed free. Faces behind glassite shields blinked upward fearfully. Any moment, the decelerating jets, bored in the nose of the rocket, might spill flame. It would hurl back over them in a mighty stream. They were getting out now, with no time to comment about Ellis' reward.

"Cheerio, people!"

"See you in church!"

"So long."

"Good boy, Ellis. Play with the sun!"

ONE, two, three. George Vanning counted the men as they peeled off in blue-electric flickers. Silver hummingbirds did not hover and vanish so swiftly as they did. Their voices fell down a well of dark emptiness, out of hearing.

Four, five, six. Six men freed of their electrical bondage, no more to be mothered by passionless durallloy, no more to clutch the Skin and sing for their safety!

The philosopher hadn't even given them his usual blessing, as they were swallowed by space. He was too busy crawling across the Great Skin. Ellis was still choking and pleading and raging inside his helmet about the sudden dark night, and the remaining men, all except bearded Old Pop and George and the philosopher had vanished.

Old Pop intercepted the philosopher in his great hurry.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

The philosopher answered quietly. He apparently still remembered he was in Church, the big Church that Someone Else had built.

"Get out of my way, man," he said. "We can't leave a blind man here. There's no time to argue space codes and ethics now. I'll take care of Ellis myself."

"You're not going to help him one bit, mister," Old Pop warned. "He stays here. You're coming along with me."

Without another word, Old Pop grabbed the philosopher in grizzled arms and kicked loose.

They were both gone before George Vanning could yell.

Everyone was gone now, each with his dream, his plan, his future. Young Tetley was gone. Maybe they'd never meet again. Tetley might drop by parachute in Kansas, Old Pop and the philosopher in Missouri, and the others anywhere from Texas to Illinois.

Ellis stretched out a groping hand.

"They're gone. All gone." He tried to see. "But someone must be left."

George cleared his throat.

"Who is it?" cried Ellis.

George crawled toward the man.

"Don't leave me here," pleaded Ellis.

"Don't. I didn't mean to kill that man. I've never hurt a thing in my life."

"I know," said George. "Here. Hold onto me."

"Who are you?" asked Ellis.

"It doesn't matter. I'll guide you. I know a hospital on Earth. They'll fix your eyes. It's a temporary blindness. Hold on!"

Ellis held to him, frantically.

"Peel off!"

The rocket went on without them. They dropped. The continent rushed up, green and new, breath-taking in its beauty. Somewhere below, thought George, the Venusian agents waiting on the rim of a hobo camp to get Ellis. But only Earthmen would get first crack at unlocking his brain, and they'd erase what they found and Ellis would be free, free even of a murder he wouldn't have done but for the men from Venus.

Still clinging together, they used propulsives to cushion their fall, and then flowered open their parachutes and floated down toward Earth, their new mother, which rose to hold them in arms of mist.

"Open your helmet locks!" commanded George. "Open up!"

They snapped locks together, swung lids up.

"Smell that!" exulted George. "Earth air! Real fresh green air! And that other stuff? Stick your fingers out. Peel off your gloves and feel! Sunlight! The big sun, the yellow sun!"

"The big sun!" Ellis cupped out hungry fingers to scoop the amber rays as he swung back and forth in the crystal air. He sounded as if he were in church. "It's been such a long, long time. The big sun!"

"I know how you feel." George hung trembling in his paraharness, exhilarated. "I've been stationed ten years on the dark asteriods. Yeah, ten years. I've been cold, too. My sun was small. And I was promised a transfer to Earth if I did a little job. A job I'm just finishing now. Something you don't even know about. And, I tell you, that sun is something new to me, too!"

They dropped together in swift pendulums, smelling the moist air all around them, and not knowing any more words to express the joy they felt.

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Breen destroyed the Dup

LIKE DUPS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

*On the weird frozen polar cap of Mars, greedy Earthman
Slug Breen gambles against time for limitless wealth!*

MORNING after morning for three weeks, now, Breen had gone over to the huddle of hovels and looked at the Dups. Every morning the Dups were still there—blue with cold, huddled together for what warmth their bodies could give each other, their eyes dull and apathetic. But they didn't leave. The ice was coming—the northern ice-cap of Mars, expanding steadily and relentlessly as the winter deepened.

The Dups couldn't stay much longer, and they knew it and were ready to go. Their few belongings were packed in the baskets which were nearly their only surviving handicraft. They could start south at any time, foraging on the winter-remnants of the vegetation their ancestors had developed. They had to do that. They were mostly all stomach and beastliness, now, and at best it would be a close race with starvation.

It was already a near race with freezing.

Without fire, when night fell they must cling together closely in order to keep alive by means of their pooled body-heat. Yet still they stayed.

"Slug" Breen wanted to curse horribly when he saw them. He wanted to drive them away with blows, or with shots from his blaster. Because there was the abandoned city. Only he knew about it. It was less than a dozen miles from Nardin, the meteorological station in which six humans—four of them men—were to stay to make the observations Martian Exploration wanted. When the Dups left, Breen could ransack the city—provided they left before the ice came. A man in any of the ancient abandoned Martian cities can gather, in mere hours, wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. But the Dups had to leave first.

Breen had known one man who got into an abandoned Martian city and out of it again before the Dups found him. When Slug Breen found him, though, they'd found him first, and he was something to make even Breen have nightmares. But Breen wasn't a tenderhearted man. He made the other man talk, and give him every detail even Breen could think of, before he would fire the blaster shot which released the poor devil. So Breen knew what to look for in a Martian city, and where. Give him a few hours among those stately palaces and he would be rich. Give him days, and he could spend the rest of his life in the sort of pleasures he craved with a raging passion. But the Dups withheld the certainty of such pleasures merely by staying in their hovels.

They were the pot-bellied and degenerate descendants of the race which had built the canals and the incredible cities of Mars. They were degraded beyond belief.

BUT Dups were not hostile. They were not friendly. They were indifferent. They continued to live among and around but never with the humans who had come to Mars. They regarded men and all their doings with a blank apathy—except when men wanted to examine the huge deserted cities the Dups seemed mostly to ignore. Then they fought like fiends, and their weapons were ghastly. They cared about nothing else, but when men essayed to explore Mars' deserted cities, the Dups were uncanny—and unconquerable.

Nothing short of an army could even attempt to explore the sprawling ruins. Even an army might not achieve it. For anything less than an army it was sheer suicide, and suicide in a fashion to make the flesh run cold. So Breen waited for the Dups to leave. He had to. He raged, but he waited—and the Dups stayed on!

Back at Nardin, the five other humans

were making their final preparations for the coming of the close-to-liquid-air temperatures of the Martian polar regions. They didn't know about the city. Breen was sure of that.

If one of them had known, he would have told the others, and they would have communicated privately with Martian Exploration for expert advice on how to make the most of an unparalleled opportunity. They would be reading cameras and all sorts of equipment. They would be preparing zestfully to keep the meteorological station going by frantic overwork while they overworked themselves still more frantically to gather every bit of information that could be extracted from the one abandoned city which would be available for human exploration.

No, the others didn't know about the city. It was Breen's secret, and his alone. The instant the Dups left, he would get the treasure. He, alone, would be enriched by it. When he was rich he would not stay to make scientific observations for Martian Exploration! Not he! He'd strike across the frozen desert to Fanhar Minor, and tell some specious story and bribe a passage back to earth with his loot on one of the freighters which came there to load zloss and frinet and waaren for the passage home. Earthmen had learned to cultivate those plants, now, and they were making the stockholders of Martian Exploration rich.

Breen did not dwell on the fact that if he took the supplies and equipment he'd need for the journey to Fanhar Minor, the others at Nardin would certainly be dead before spring. His mind did not not work that way. His thoughts were almost exclusively of his hatred of the Dups, who stayed on when he wished them gone.

He regarded the hovels and scowled. The tiny, heatless sun was in the act of breaking reluctantly free from the horizon. It would move slowly, slowly, slowly, along the edge of the dreary desert. Above the brittle stalks along the canal-way, it would take on a faintly coppery hue. Presently it would edge wearily down below the horizon again. At no time would it be more than five degrees high. The Dups should leave! They must leave! They had to leave!

He strode toward the hovels. They were unspeakable, made of mud long since dried and now frozen. It was cold—cold even for the shivering Dups, and unspeakably cold to a human being. It was far below zero, and the Dups did not know fire. Their ancestors had known it, but they had forgotten.

An old, old Dup, bloated and sunk in apathy, sat outside one of the hovels. His dulled eyes stared at the sun without interest. Breen scowled at him, and then saw what had happened to his leg. There was a red

swollen splotch on it, like an unwholesome bud. It was not red like blood, even Dup blood. It was a lurid crimson, actually cerise. It was unnatural, incredible, impossible. It was the result of a prick by an oonah spear. This ancient Dup was a dead thing, yet alive. Nothing could save him. He was waiting to die, and no man would have waited this long for death, not with the breath-stopping agony of that creeping loathesomeness upon him. But the Dup stared dully at the sun.

Breen moved so that his shadow fell in The Dup's eyes. They examined Breen without curiosity. The Dup sank back into apathy. Breen took a fire-brick from the pocket of his cold-suit. He put it on the ground and squeezed the corner. It warmed, immediately. It gave off a grateful, dull-red heat. The Dup stirred. Warmth. He moved his arms, so that the heat would reach his congealing skin.

PRESENTLY he solemnly turned his back, so that it would be warmed also. He reached out. The mud wall where the heat struck was appreciably warmed. He sat down again and looked at the fire-brick. There was a flicker of life in his eyes, now. Presently he regarded Breen with a faint, faint curiosity.

In Breen's mind a question formed faintly. "Why?"

No earthman understood the Dup's language, though they had been heard to speak. It was possible to communicate with them, if and when they could be persuaded to pay attention, by concentrating violently upon a thought. They could grasp a thought if it was held to with enough of an effort. They could convey an idea when they wished to. But mostly they were uninterested.

"Friend," thought Breen savagely. "I am your friend."

The Dups did not grasp subtleties. Thought transference—if that was what it was—did not go deep. Mentally one had to shout to reach through their apathy. One's private thoughts produced no reaction.

There was silence. The dark-purplish sky of polar Mars loomed overhead. Stars were faintly visible, even with the sun above the horizon. The ancient Dup, with that ghastly crimson splotch upon his leg—a sensitive man's flesh would have crawled at the thought of it—stared dully at the fire-brick. Presently another faint thought formed in Breen's mind.

"Heat—good."

"It is warm in the south," thought Breen with great concentration. "It—is—warm—in—the—south.—You—should—go."

The Dup's eyes moved again. He looked at Breen, and it seemed as if there were a

flicker of irony in his expression. Irony in a Dup? Breen was in no mood to look for it. The faint image of a thought again.

"I—die."

Breen ground his teeth.

"You should go south. All Dups should go south. I will give heat."

He sweated with the energy he strove to put into the thought. He tried to make it a command. The Dup regarded him with eyes in which there was a faint flicker of something less than apathy. Breen unloaded his pockets. Fire-bricks. Four ounces each. Squeeze the corner, and each one would glow gently red-hot for eight hours. Necessary on Mars. Doubly, trebly, infinitely necessary at the polar ice-cap of Mars.

"Dups march by day," thought Breen fiercely. "March far. At night there is heat."

He said it, as if the words would help. He thought it over and over again. He heaped up the fire-bricks on the ground. The Dup stirred, and put his back against another part of the mud wall behind him, which also had been warmed by the heat. A faint thought formed yet again in Breen's mind. It had a curious savor. It was the idea "Friend," but there was something odd about it. Presently Breen realized what the oddity might be. It was as if the Dup smiled. . .

Next day at dawn he left Nardin and went to a spot where he could see the hovels of the Dups. They were still there. They sat listlessly in the grayish light, in clusters. There were thirty-two Dups in this village or tribe. They sat motionless, sunk in apathy. In the center of each of the clusters a fire-brick glowed. The Dups could stay longer, because of the fire-bricks.

Breen could have screamed with rage. He dared not go near the city while the Dups remained. Somehow—nobody could guess exactly how—they always knew when a human tried to worm his way into the ancient ruins. Some few men had succeeded, to be sure. There were photographs and even a few artifacts of Martian manufacture in Earth museums, but they had cost lives, and men who had once seen how death came from Dup weapons would not risk it again.

There was nothing to be done. Nothing. The old people, the ancestors of the Dups, had been a great and even a magnificent race. Faced with the dwindling resources of a dying planet, they had conquered, splendidly. They had built the canal-ways, irrigated by works which human engineers still fretted over, trying to understand. But they had not only been engineers. They had dealt with the plants which grew upon the irrigated ground. There was not a weed left upon Mars.

Every growing thing upon every inch of

the thousands of miles of canal-ways—was not a domesticated plant—but a contrived one. Each had been designed and engineered by biologists and geneticists. Each supplied, to perfection past Earth imagining, a need of the ancient race and the Dups who had descended from them.

EVEN weapons need not be made upon Mars. The horribly deadly oonah spears were not manufactured. They were plucked. They floated through the air like lethal thistle-down when the Dups chose to use them. There were other weapons, many others. No man knew all the plants on Mars, not even all the useful or the deadly ones. But the Dups knew.

Breen marched blindly onward, stamping and cursing, when he had seen the Dups sitting by the fire-bricks. He raged. He swore. He wanted to howl with fury. Because the ice-cap drew nearer. It loomed up over the northern horizon now. Day by day it came closer over the curiously tumbled country which was first a shallow lake and then a marsh—the only marsh on Mars—when spring came. Presently the ice would cover the city.

He saw a Dup, moving across-country in the dreary, listless shuffle which was the Dup gait. He came from the direction of the abandoned city. Breen felt a flash of panic. He had seen the city once, and carefully had never gone in that direction again. If this Dup seemed to be suspicious, some deception must be used.

A thought wormed its way into Breen's consciousness.

"Friend," said the thought, with that odd impression of a smile.

It was the ancient Dup with the crimson bud of an oonah-spear wound on his leg, the Dup to whom Breen had given the heat-bricks, with the fiercely reiterated urge that all the Dups go south.

Breen waited. The scene was queer. The winds on Mars are thin, but the gravity of Mars is small, and there were scurrying sand-devils beneath the dark-purple sky. Far to the south there was the tiny cold sun, barely above the horizon. Except to southward there was no horizon. Elsewhere hung a thin mist, stirring restlessly, which blotted out everything. It was somehow reminiscent of winter on Earth. On Earth, however, a man does not have to wear a Martian cold-suit and carry fire-bricks in addition.

The Dup shuffled close. Now, somehow, he did not seem cold. He walked with what for a Dup was unusual energy. He carried two stalks of some Martian plant unfamiliar to Breen.

"Friend," came his thought again. "Dups go south now."

Breen contained his fury. He knitted his brows to concentrate.

"All Dups should go. Cold comes."

He had that queer impression of a smile before the thought formed, this time.

"I die. I stay."

Breen tried to blank his mind. But ugly thoughts formed. If only this one Dup remained, a blaster could take care of him.

"Friend," came the ghostly thought in his mind. "Heat good. I take you to city. No earth-man has seen city. You see."

Breen's brain raced. Some of the men who had been killed by Dups for entering an abandoned city, had never even seen the Dup who killed them. Maybe the Dups had traps. But if this fool would show him a clear way in, he would be a fool not to take it. If the Dup thought he would be content only to look—why—it would be the sensible thing to blast him as soon as they got in. There would be no danger in that. The old Dup would be abandoned by the other Dups, and he was half-way dead already from that horrible crimson bud on his leg. How did he stand the agony? A man would be mad with pain.

Vague pictures were forming in Breen's mind again. At sunrise, tomorrow, the Dups would file away, all of them, heading south with their clumsily woven baskets.

"Friend," said the faint thought, smiling. "No tell other humans. See city. Heat good."

The ancient Dup shuffled into the unspeakable village of mud hovels. Breen turned away.

He was away from Nardin next morning in time to see the shuffling small horde of Dups start down the canalway for the south. They were grotesque. They were corpulent and depraved and sunk in the misery of an existence they were too apathetic to change. They carried their baskets, which somehow seemed fuller than they had been. But Breen did not worry about the contents of the baskets. He counted the Dups. They were one short of the entire horde. That would be the ancient with his oonah-wound, who could not live in any case. But he, because he was dying, had accepted Breen for his friend. He would show him the way into the city. Perhaps he would show him treasures only the Dups knew of.

THE Dup sat in the grayish sunlight against the wall of his hovel. The horrible bud-like excrescence on his leg had grown larger. His eyes were dull, but they moved when Breen appeared before him. Breen waited. Wispy thought crept into his mind.

"Friend. Come to city. Heat good."

The Dup stood up. It was cold, horribly cold.

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cold. Human flesh, exposed to such searing frigidty, would have turned white with frost-bite in seconds. Dups had a queerly porous hide which conserved heat, but even Dups were not made to endure such cold as this. The ancients had made garments from zloss which would have protected them from any conceivable degree of frost, but this Dup, like all his tribe, was almost naked. He carried the inevitable basket-work pouch with its trumpy contents of leaves and other things. There was a rag which might be a loin-cloth. That was all.

He had nearly reached the end of his endurance. There were places where his hide was peeling off in patches, the porous, protective skin frozen through and broken away from the flesh beneath. Listlessly he shuffled in the direction of the abandoned city.

Breen followed. The thin steel mast which marked the site of Nardin vanished in the swirling gray sand-devils which hid the horizon. The unspeakable hovels of the Dups fell behind and ceased to be visible. There was nothing anywhere but the weird corrugations of the ground which previous polar ice-caps had made and only partially obliterated by melting.

There were the angular, frozen, dilapidated remnants of the vegetation which sprang up each year when the Martian ice-cap melted. Here, where for months each Martian year there was actually a swamp, the plants grew tall. Here were the bulbous thick cylinders which were anth trees, the steel-hard wood with its many-colored graining which had been used for jewelry, on earth.

The Dup shuffled on. Presently a thought formed in Breen's mind.

"Only Dups see city. Friend. Friend be like Dups."

Breen puzzled over the meaning of it. Friend be like Dups? Men were not like Dups. How could he be like a Dup? Then he understood. No man had ever been accepted as a friend by a Dup before. This was new, all through. Probably the Dup meant, since only Dups could see a Martian city, and Breen was his friend, that somehow Breen would technically become a Dup. A process of adoption, perhaps, honorary membership in the depraved and degenerate society of Dups. Breen could have laughed at that, and it would have been an unpleasant laugh, had he not been all raging impatience.

It was twelve miles from Nardin, and eight from the Dup village. It took two hours to reach it. The listless shuffle of the Dup covered the ground with surprising speed, but to Breen anything was too slow. Yet even by himself he could hardly have moved much faster over so great a distance. He was on fire to get there, with his raging greed.

"In city are many plants," came the next thought creeping into his mind. The thought gave Breen a dim picture of a wide expanse of open ground, in which grew strange plants, like the two plant-stalks this Dup had carried the day before.

"We pluck plants," came the thought. "We go there." Again a picture.

It was dim and indistinct and wavering, but it was of a room, a cubicle, the walls of which flashed glinting lights in innumerable colors. There was, in particular, a monstrous gem-studded object upon something like an altar at one side.

"You be like Dups," the creeping mental message said with that curious overtone of a smile. "Always friend. Like Dups."

Breen's heart pounded horribly. Almost he slavered in anticipation. The riches he had imagined were dwarfed, were made trivial by comparison with what he could read into the picture the Dup had conveyed to him. He quickened his pace, instinctively filled with rage because of delay in the realization of this new expectation. He was furious because he must wait until he reached that place.

The city appeared dimly through the mist of swirling sand-devils. It had no soaring architecture. It was wide-spread and low, built of materials which had endured no one knew how many thousands of years. It had been covered by the ice-cap not once but thousands of times. Yet still it endured.

It was all one building, consisting of thousands of dwellings, perhaps, but joined in one structure under a single roof. There were streets, but they were roofed with some transparent stuff. Here and there he saw cracks where melting water—in the course of thousands of years—had trickled down into the city. But the colors of the walls were fresh and new. The pictures—in relief and in the round, and tinted as the Greeks painted their statuary—almost seemed to be alive. The surface underfoot was yielding and resilient as it had been when the ancients were a proud and zestful race.

BUT Breen had no eye for beauties. He was a madman with impatience. The old Dup shuffled before him, casting no glance at the abandoned glories of his forbears. Breen wanted to curse for sheer inability to wait.

"First pluck plant," said the faintly forming thought. "Then be like Dups. Friend."

The room had walls of flashing gems. That was what Breen wanted to see. Let him once get within that room of incalculable riches and he would kill this old fool. He would not search further. He would pile up such riches as no human being in all history had ever held in his grasp before.

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Science? Knowledge? Breen could have spat at the thought. His eyes burned. Once in that room with the priceless walls, there was nothing beyond his reach.

The old Dup turned aside. There was an open space, roofed with the transparent ceiling that protected the walkways. But here were plants growing. They were yellow now. They had come to maturity. Breen could see where the leaves of a part of the plants had been harvested. He suddenly understood the situation as if a light had burst upon him.

The Dups had waited for these plants to be ready to harvest. They had stayed, frozen and shivering and miserable, until these leaves were ready to be plucked. The previous morning this same ancient Dup had showed them two stalks, proving that they need wait no longer. They had come here to this place to the harvest. Now they were gone, with their baskets filled with the curious, sharp-tipped leaves.

The old Dup went to an unharvested part of the field and plucked.

"You do also," said the thought which came into Breen's brain, followed by a flickering picture of the room of blazing gems. "Then you be like Dups. Friend. City yours. Everything you wish yours."

Breen made a noise in his throat. He seized a double handful of the sharp-pointed leaves. He had the feel of a smile in his brain. The Dup went shuffling to a rounded doorway. He went in. Breen followed. It was dark. He turned on his shoulder-lamp, for it was just as simple as that.

Here at last was the room of the gem-studded walls! Off to one side, as if on an altar, stood a stalk of the strange plant, formed of jewels. The walls were a mural of its cultivation, of its development, of its invention. It was incredible. The walls flashed flame as the light-beam struck. The room was a representation of unthinkable exuberance. It had been constructed to honor the glories of the plant which grew outside—leaves of which Breen held in his hands.

Breen gave a hoarse cry. He flung himself forward, to tear at the riches about him. But a thought formed in his mind. It was somehow quaintly reproachful—and smiling. "Not yet. First be like Dup. Do—this!"

The old Dup faced the garish jeweled image of a plant. He made a gesture, holding up a single separated yellow leaf. Then he put it in his mouth. "Do likewise," said the thought in Breen's brain.

He obeyed. He was feverish, half-mad with exultation and impatience. All Dups are armed, always, and it was little enough to do. When the Dup had seen perform the mummery and turned his head, a flash of the blaster would settle matters.

The leaf was good. The flavor of frnet was gross by comparison. It had an exquisite savor. It was like a perfume, like a strong, heady, wine. Like—like—like—

Breen was omnipotent.

For a space he stood still, savoring a drunken sense of power. The Dup looked at him.

"Friend."

Breen felt a surge of raging contempt, and destroyed him utterly. There was only a little cloud of downward-sifting ash where the Dup had been. Then Breen stripped the walls of their riches. They made a monstrous heap like leaping flame, the price of ten thousand men or twenty thousand women. He went striding through the city. Exultation flowed in his veins like fire. Treasure unthinkable, riches past counting—all were his!

His thoughts leaped ahead, raging, to the pleasures this wealth would buy. Ah, but he was omnipotent. He was in the midst of a wild spree. Wine flowed like water. All things were his. Every whim was gratified, for he was omnipotent! There was nothing he could not do, nothing he could not have. His power and possessions were limitless.

He forgot the heap of jewels he had stripped from the walls. He made a waterfall of golden coins. He put his enemies—those who had despised him in the past—beneath the pouring stream of riches and watched as their flesh was sliced away by the sharp-edged shower of wealth. When they died too quickly, he revived them and gloated over new torments he could inflict. His ears were filled with the screams of those who had scorned him. Men wept before him. And he laughed . . .

HE WAS omnipotent for a long time. But presently, insistently the image of the room of jewels returned to him. At first it was vague and shadowy, but his omnipotence faded bit by bit. At last he was sitting in the room, his back against the wall. The Dup he had destroyed was there, too. A fire-brick glowed on the floor between them. Its heat was good. The Dup regarded him with lack-lustre eyes which gradually flickered into an amused contemplativeness.

"Like Dups," was the thought which crawled into Breen's brain. "Like Dups now."

Breen stirred. He realized. The plant which had been celebrated in this cubicle of exuberant wealth—the plant was a drug and merely released the mind. Under its influence one felt that he was omnipotent. He could do anything—be anything. The ancients had contrived it. Having defeated the decay of their planet by creating planets which met every conceivable physical need

of the race, they had sought to top their achievement by meeting the inevitable need for dreams. This plant had met it.

Breen had no feeling of depression, no physical aftermath as a result of the drug. The ancient race would have made sure of that. It was to be a luxury, and the perfect luxury should have no ill effects. He had not even a foul taste in his mouth, only a delicate lingering flavor.

He stood up. The Dup sat apathetically still. Fire-bricks were ranged neatly in plain view. One glowed dully. The Dup had brought Breen here and—well—it was probably some form of initiation into Duphood. While Breen had sat in seeming apathy, engaged in the exercise of an illusory omnipotence, the Dup had squeezed one of the fire-bricks. It was warm here in the room with the jeweled walls.

"Your thoughts—strange," came the worming message in Breen's brain. There was the wavering perception of the wild ideas which had beset Breen's brain during his period of utter power. It was subtly twisted, as if seen through a Dup's eyes. "Why?"

Breen flared into rage. Quite automatically he reached for his blaster. Then he had a shock. His blaster was gone!

He had the feel of a smile, even as horror filled him. The Dup had read his vision of omnipotence in its every detail. Dups could read the minds of men. This Dup had known from the beginning that Breen had found the ancient city, that he had told no one about it, that he had intended to loot it of treasure, that he expected to abandon his companion humans, taking from them equipment on which their lives would depend. The Dup had known all along of Breen's twisted schemes. Dups always fought like fiends to keep their cities inviolate. Dups knew everything that men knew."

"Yes," said the thought in his mind. It was amused. "I knew from always. But heat—good. Friend. Like Dups."

Breen's hands clenched. He would kill this Dup who mocked him, who knew every shameful thought and every crawling horror in his mind. He took one step forward. Agony shot through him.

He tore crazily at his cold-suit. A tiny sliver, an oonah spear, had been thrust into the fabric. When he strode forward, it had scratched him. The Dup had put it there. Breen would die, like the Dup.

Breen screamed. His shriek came from more than horror. The agony was almost unbearable, and it was growing. He would have killed himself, but his blaster was gone. He screamed again. The Dup regarded him dully, sending him a thought.

The leaf had a flavor which made the ex-

[Turn page]

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quisite taste of frnet seem gross. But, more important, it made him omnipotent. He commanded the pain to cease, and it ceased. The mystifying thoughts in the Dup's brain soon became extraordinarily clear. The Dup had shared his dream and his beastliness. Now the Dup shared his omnipotence with Breen. There was no hatred in the Dup's mind.

One who is accustomed to the sensation of omnipotence does not share a grudge. The Dup was amused as he made it clear to Breen that the ancients had made a plant which would grant all desires.

But Breen's own brain saw that it explained the Dups. They could have no wishes which the taste of these leaves would not instantly gratify. So they gratified all their wishes—through the leaves. Reality was merely tedium. They could know all that men knew and they could do all that men could do. But they were not interested. They could do all of that and an infinitude of greater things, in dreams.

DUPS need have but one concern with reality, that men should not come to the plots of sheltered dream-plants in the ancient abandoned cities and so perhaps take away the dreams in which and by which and for which the Dups lived.

Those dreams, the Dup made amusingly clear to Breen, were greater than the deeds of men. For example—

Breen shared the Dup's imaginings. They were strange, but they were fascinating in their oddity. Later, there was pain unspeakable, so he tasted the leaf again. There were more dreams. Which the Dup shared. . .

They were very companionable, Breen and the Dup, resting in the room whose walls were lined with flashing gems. Breen shared the masterpieces of Dup imaginings, and the Dup experienced in Breen's omnipotence all of human imagining of pleasure. . .

When the last of the fire-bricks were gone it grew very, very cold, but it hardly mattered. The ice-cap had covered the city by then, but it did not matter at all.

Breen and the Dup sat together, their eyes dull. They sat motionless, apathetic, together.

They were friends. Like Dups. When it was quite sure, the ancient Dup slyly let Breen understand another thing. Dups were not fools. They simply—well—it was not thinkable that any one Dup should cling to reality, with all its tedium and disappointment, when all his fellows reveled in omnipotence and he could sense and share their most magnificent dreams.

Dups did not dislike men. Rather, from the heights of their omnipotence—in dreams—they tolerantly approved of them. Perhaps they even liked them, a little too well to

let them become like Dups. If Breen had succeeded in entering and looting the dead city, other men would have come and examined its remotest corner. They might have learned about the dream-plants. So in making sure that Breen could not lead anybody to this utterly fatal gift, his friend the Dup had done all men a favor. He had even done Breen a favor. He had taken away his greed, his cruelty and his power to do wrong. Was that not so?

Breen agreed, comfortably. He was all-powerful. He could do anything. Yes, they were friends. He was like the Dups.

The cold grew too great for anything to live. He and the Dup ceased to dream almost at the same instant. But only they knew it. The ice-cap covered everything—the city, the frozen sands outside, the polar regions of Mars, enfolding all in its frigid embrace.

The Reader Speaks

(Continued from page 8)

I made a hurried exit, but forgot to open the door. (Someday I'll get a carpenter to put it back on its hinges.)

The drugstore was open, so I zoomed in, traveling so fast that I made a whistling sound.

"Where is it?" I screamed loudly. "For God's sake, tell me!"

"Over there." She pointed to an open doorway. I reached the door, then bowed my head in homage as I entered. Now I saw IT and my mouth watered in delightful anticipation.

THE FALL ISSUE OF THRILLING WONDER

STORIES HAS ARRIVED. I snatched a copy of the mag, staggered out, and dropped fifteen molded, long hoarded, pennies into the cashier's out-stretched hand. I glided out into the street, my arms locked tightly around the treasure.

Somehow I reached my humble home without being mobbed. I locked (and double-locked) my bedroom door. Then I got my first good look at the cover. My dreams have come true. No BEM, babe, or muscle-bound hero. Just a peaceful (?) rocket ship leaving a Earth which has too many moons. (No, that "a Earth" shouldn't be "an Earth." Earth is a proper noun. Guess I used the word "Earth" too many times.) A perfect cover. Oh bliss.

SWORD OF TOMORROW—Kutner's masterpiece. Even better than BABY FACE. Again, the artist is unknown, but illustrations are perfect. (Especially the one on page thirteen. Wolf-wolf! S. O. T. gets ten jugs of Xeno. Stop that infernal drooling, Sarge.)

SPACE TRAP—one jug. Following poem (1) gives true impression of it.

Roses are red, violets are blue;
SPACE TRAP smelts, and the drawing too.
Haw, let Chnd Oliver beat that one.

THE NEMESIS OF THE ASTROPEDE—five jugs. Illustration fair.

COSMIC CARAVAN—seven jugs. After looking at the picture a few moments, it turned into a mass of confusing crosses. "Yuff-ee."

INTERLINK and ONE CAME BACK rate a half jug apiece.

Now, for THE READER SPEAKS. Stop drawing back into your hole, Sarge. YOU'RE GONNA LISTEN AND LIKE IT!

Best letter—Joe Kennedy. I am ashamed of you, PRIVATE Saturn. (Yas, yer demoted) Your superior officer (ahem.) demoted you for grumbling about fans using other methods than Xeno for rating stories, then Jerry Berman gets away with using fractions. I don't like it, because I have not got to them in school yet, and I can't tell what in blazes he means.

[Turn page]

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By now, you have committed mayhem on your-self, and Wart-Ears is making Xeno from your blood, so I will stop.—603 14th Street, Pascagoula, Miss.

One moment, Kiwi Corley. Is there anything personal in that mayham ye Sarge is supposed to commit on himself? Or is it just that you are not the type who hems around? Better learn spelling and fractions. Actually Jerry Berman got away with it only because Wart-ears did an inept job drawing the bung of a Xeno keg and ye Sarge was temporarily blind. As for that poem, Oliver could beat it with one lobe of his cerebellum embalmed. So:

Take off, you mug, you'd best begone
Before you meet with this round tripper
Or else you'll find that you've been danner.
Quartered and hung, on the Big Dipper.

OFF TO CHINA

by Leon Birnbaum

Mr. Saturn: I read your article about the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft in the Spring issue of TWS. I also read a certain low-grade moron's reply on the same subject. This moron's name is Ralph Gilsson and this letter is addressed to both of you.

What right has a small-time so-called writer like you to challenge the work of the great Mr. Lovecraft? You state that Lovecraft's work couldn't be mentioned in the same paragraph with H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe. That convinced me that you don't know the difference between masterpieces of literature and your stupid bowl of Xeno.

And this Ralph Gilsson admits he has only been reading TWS for the past three issues. Yet he had the gall to compare Lovecraft's work to TWS tripe. What right has he to criticize Lovecraft's work?

I have been reading TWS for the past ten years. In all that time I have never read a story half as good as Lovecraft's worst. My advice to you is to read Lovecraft's work and print an apology or pack up your stupid magazine and move to China. When you dig up a writer half as good as Lovecraft, I'll retract my statement.—205 Ocean View Avenue, Brooklyn 24, New York.

What is it about Brooklyn that makes any sort of fan so vehement and dictatorial? Kiwi Gilsson and ye Sarge have every right to feel any way we wish about Lovecraft, Thomas Mann or the late Gil Standish of Frank Merriwell fame. We recognize your right to c'o likewise, so why blow a blood vessel about a matter of opinion? Frog-eyes, slap his wrist for losing his temper. And why has he been reading us for ten years (as claimed) if he dislikes us so?

TORONTO TREATMENT

by Ned McKeown

Dear Sarge:

Scene: In the centre of a group of little creatures stands a stoop-shouldered individual, blushing and cracking his knuckles. The little Nuges are chanting "Bergey's got a space-ship cover, Bergey's got a space-ship cover!"

Yes, Sarge at last it has happened. Bergey has done a cover without the eternal triangle. My birthday is just next week and I think it is the nicest thing Earle K. could have given me. Bestow upon this thoughtful man ten jugs of Xeno.

But, Sarge, you give us something precious only to cut something that is dear to every reader's heart. Namely "The Reader Speaks." It keeps getting shorter and less interesting every issue. Let's have a discussion by some of the old fans such as Pace, Oliver, Weinstein, Kennedy, etc.

While I'm at it, here's the way the stories in the Fall issue stack up:

1. "Sword of Tomorrow"—Henry Kuttner, 'nough said. Anything by Hank is always O.K. in my books—8 jugs of Xeno.

2. "Cosmic Caravan"—Ed Weston. An excellent story, but why must all the characters turn out to be noble knights on lily-white chargers. It may sound

good, brother, but it just ain't human. There's just gotta be one rotten apple in the barrel—7 jugs.

3. "Interlink"—J. R. Fearn—not the best story that I have read of its type but still fair—6 jugs.

4. "The Nemesis of the Astropede"—Stanton A. Coblenz. Average, Average, Average—5½ jugs.

5. "Space Trap"—Polton Cross Cross really can write good stuff when he's not writing tripe like this—1½ jugs.

6. "One Came Back"—George Whitley Don't even let this one smell the cork from one of the jugs.

By the way Sarge, I'm in a predicament. I've got the first two parts of Festus Pragnelli's great story "The Green Man of Graypec" which appeared in the old Wonder Stories back in 1935. Is there any fan who would be willing to part with a copy so I could find out what happens?—1336 Mt. Pleasant Avenue, Toronto, Ontario.

On the whole, thanks, Pee-lot McKeown. But if TRS is growing shorter and you miss some of the old familiars, don't blame us. Pace, Oliver, Kennedy, Weinstein and the rest of the old gang simply haven't been sending them in. Maybe it's an era of turnover in the fanhack department. Frankly, we hope not, but some of the more recent contributors don't shape up too badly. At any rate, ye Sarge is stuck with what turns up in the mail bag. Remember, he's way out in space, many light years ago, so how in the seven moons of Saturn he's expected to coddle these Terrian missivists he fails to understand.

Oh, oh, Wart-ears, here comes another beef—get that Xeno down, boy, get that Xeno down—or ye Sarge will be down too.

ROCKET FROM A GOON

by F. W. English

Dear Sarge: This letter comes as a repercussion of the Summer and Fall issues of TWS concerning R. L. Farnsworth and the United States Rocket Society.

I am member number 572 of this worthwhile organization and resent your degrading comments. A new [Turn page]

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mental attitude is arising in many Americans. When rockets do come these will be the men capable of handling them intelligently. Those who can not understand this should stay in their rocking chairs and not sneer. Better stick to Science Fiction, Sarge.

As to why any one should want to reach the moon, any one with brains (Sarge, note) should know that this is only the first step. If we can build a rocket that can reach the moon, it will be simple to construct one that can reach more distant worlds. See your library for a copy of Willy Ley's "Rockets." Of course our Society is just a beginning. Any effort, however, is better than none.

The above is no reflection upon your magazine which I enjoy very much with the exception of your column. If it's humor YOU want turn the column over to Joe Kennedy. On the average all the stories are good. I won't rate them. It seems some of your readers expect classics in every issue. How could we tell when one came along if we didn't have any mediocre ones to compare it with?—101½ S. Main St., Fort Worth 4, Texas.

Should you happen to catch the next issue of our space-flying companion, STARTLING STORIES, Kiwi English, you will find therein a fuller explanation at ye Sarge's blast—which was directed against the literary pretensions of the society's publisher rather than against any urge to zoom through space like this old astrogator.

However, ye Sarge is still chuckling over the discovery that orange peel juice will burn better than orange pulp juice. He hereby goes on record as being entirely in favor of planting orange trees in space ships. That would be a sight to behold, wouldn't it, Snaggletooth?

THAT POLL CAT'S HERE

by Delbert Grant

Dear Sarge: I am an avid reader of TWS and SS and would like to voice my opinion concerning this magazine. First, I think "Cosmic Caravan" should top the bill in the last issue. You can put "Interlink" next, followed by "The Nemesis of the Astropede" and "Sword of Tomorrow." "Space Trap" and "One Came Back" tie for fifth place.

As for the Cosby poll, if it's not too late, I'd like to put in my vote as follows—

1. One novel per issue is enough.
2. Four pictures per novel is plenty.
3. Fifty pages to a novel and twelve for a novelet are okay.
4. Only one novelet per issue. You can fill in with more short stories.
5. At the least, five shorts.
6. One fact article, preferably about science.
7. Departments—THE READER SPEAKS and THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY.
8. TWS readers aren't that finicky!
9. You bet your boots I would!
10. Twelve stories per copy—and make 'em good.
11. I'd pay up to fifty cents a copy.
12. Makes no difference either way.
13. Twice a year.
14. As often as possible.
15. I'm not stuck on series stories.
16. Do I like serials? Man, I love 'em!
17. As they say in Spain, "Yo no tengo unos excitores favoritos." (Ye Sarge hopes this makes sense!)
18. How's about starting a club, huh, Sarge?

About that club—why don't you have passwords, codes, et cetera? If you get stuck, come to me. I know millions of codes.—411 Adams Street, Lewiston, Idaho.

Very well, Delbert, we hereby dump the whole business in your lap and in those of any other interested fans!

IS HIS GOOSE COOKED?

by Private C. F. Derry

Dear Sergeant: Since the Army's about to toss me out, thank God, I thought I might as well annoy you awhile. Besides it passes the time. I guess the real reason I wanted to write you isn't to get my name in print. But being an old SF fan and slightly adult I am saddened at the trend that SF has taken.

I can remember a long time ago. When SF was print-

ed on large coarse, pulp stock. The mags had thick cardboard covers and had cover artists like Frank R. Paul. Those weren't as most of the fans tell themselves, the "Good Old Days", rather they were the days of Creation.

There follows a long list of classics. Written by such notables as Grensback, Hamilton, Kuttner, Leinster, Verill, Taine, and a million others whose names I can't spell. True the same writers, most of them, are writing today. But the superspeed of today demands tripe.

Must this violation of the magazines come to Science-fiction?

I will admit that you have writing for you now the cream of the crop of writers. But just because some other types of mags demand plot and women and slush, need SF?

Please don't think that because I write this way I am an old fogey who is SF fan and nothing else. I am quite young and I have been acquainted with the writing game before, and hope to be again. It is just that the last refuge of good writing is going fast.

When the trend to juvenile writing started in other types of escape fiction I hoped it would bypass SF. For a long time it did miss SF. For a long time it was the last place a man could read a good story because it was a good story. And not a lot of overplotted hogwash with women in it because they looked good.

Though your mag always did cater to more of the action type of story it has dropped lower and lower in the last year or so.

My final gripe is this silly, idiotic, babyfied, chatter that the you, the editor, use. I agree that the 'ine goes with the fiction of late.

That's all for now and I don't even care if you print it or not. I know that I have cooked my goose of ever selling a story at your shop. But, by heaven and earth, it's the truth.

I can only say, in closing that I am very sorry to see this happen. I don't even enjoy reading SF any more.

—Co. A 38th Inf. APO 2, Camp Swift, Texas.

Why don't you try writing some yarns for us, Senor Derry Down Derry? If you think such a blast bars anyone who can produce it from selling us good or even adequate fiction, you might as

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well continue your genial rustication at the pearl among encampments, Camp Swift. We can take criticism—and we're always trying to improve the mag. Fortunately, most of the clients don't share your opinions!

As for the objection to our babyfied chatter, come see us when you're in mufti—but send us a note first so we can get out of town in plenty of time and obtain a sublease on our apartment!

IT CAN'T BE ESPERANTO!

by G. U. Irnditt (the wag!)

Dear Sarge: I am 5 yrs. old and I just had to write in and tell you how all us kindergartners feel about your magz and your letz colmz espeshly. Sargle old sponge, we realize you are trying to put out magz that will be just right for peepz our age, but reely, Sarge, we arnt that young. If you'd just raise your sights about ten parsex... pieez! Seriously, we think TWS and SS are the height of something or other. We arnt sure just what.

Somewhere I seem to've pikt up a fantastic roomr that the reglr driv-dish on the letz colmz is the Sarge lself. Pieez say it aint so. It offenz my senz of logic and of the fitness of thingz. Why shoold the Sarge waste his valub time on a chore that cood be performed as well by any awfs-boy with a second-grade education? Or even betr by 1 with no education at all.

I have followed your fantashic magz at a disrespeckful distans for the last 35 yrsz (anyhow it seemz that long) without missing a thing, and feel certain I cood follow them for the next 35 yrsz at an even greater distans and still not miss anything. I trust I make myself perfly pellicud!

I dont mean to imply that I think your magz smell or anything like that. I just wear this gasmak becawz I think it's so becoming. Besides, these blit-in dark gogglz protect my eyes against those covrzs. That Bersgiz mag! Well it's something, but it aint s-f.

I'll admit his grilz (dont they evr get chilly?) are the only reason I evr buy your magz, but I still say George Pettz is betr. Except maybe on faces, and who evr notices faces? Duz Bersgiz work from live modlz, and if so how duz I go about obtaining their phone nos.? Anyway he beats Belarski.

Fall ish of TWS seems to be down to your usual levil. Kuttner—What's that? Oh yes, the Fall no didnt have a covriss covr gril, didn't it, so why'd I bite? Fact is, I bawt that book by mistake. Just grabd it up thinking nacherly it was another mag, and the man woodnt give me my money back. Reely Sarge, you shooodnt spring thingz like that covr on us without warnin; I almost past out. It made old TWS look almost respectabl and we cant have that, can we?

Yes, yes, striking and artistic... by the way, what is it? A space ship, apparntly, only its mother must've been frightind by a flying wing. If anybody can think up a plausibl reezon why a space ship shoood evr be blit along those lines, I will forevermore shut up.

Contents—well, less sed the betr. Fearn, Cross, and

P.F.C. JOE PALOOKA SAYS

by Hoot Frasier

...AN ANOTHER THING. WE'RE ALL EATIN' REGULARLY OVER HERE. WHAT'S KEEPIN' US FROM SENDIN' ALL THE FOOD WE CAN OVER TO EUROPE THIS WINTER? WE DIDN'T LIBERATE THOSE PEOPLE JUST SO'S THEY COULD STARVE...



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of Keno are slightly off the beam. I think, but perhaps that is just because I like our hill-country White Mule so much better. Try it some time. Great stuff. If it doesn't kill you.—414—37th Street, Parkersburg, West Virginia.

In our circles, White Mule is consumed only by Snaggletooth's embryonic nephew and niece, bless their little Arcturean dentistry. However, thanks for a few kind words just when ye Sarge was going down for the third time.

ANTI-PINUP-MAN by Tom Wade

Dear Sarge: Last week I walked into a newsstand. There, staring me in the face, was a conventional cover on TWS. Hoping against hope, as I flipped the pages, I found what I had feared—on the eleventh page was a true pinup pose. Likewise on page 13. Why do you print them?

In reading your letter section in the Fall Issue, I noticed that some so-and-so said all Lovercraft's stories contained the same plot. Let this uninformed character read "In the Vault," "Pickman's Model," "The Rats in the Walls," "The Thing On the Doorstep" or any of many others. I could go on, but it would take too much space. And to think that you agreed!

I have been reading TWS and SS for about three years and find the stories generally good. The artwork could be improved in subject, but aside from that it is excellent. I rated your Fall Issue stories as follows:

1. "Sword of Tomorrow"
2. "Cosmic Caravan"

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3. "Interlink"
4. "Space Trap"
5. "The Nemesis of the Astropede"
6. "One Came Back"

The stories were excellent except for "One Came Back." In the letter section I really was amused by Joe Kennedy's letter. Next best was the one by Willard Grimes.—821 N. 24th Street, Philadelphia 30, Penna.

Okay, Pee-lot Wade, and a very nice letter. But let it be understood once and for all that the Sarge likes pinups. So you and you and you are strictly out of luck. After all, a man has a right to. . . But never mind, Froggy. Close the ports and roll out the Xeno. We're off for another space journey. See all you kiwis in a couple of months. So long!

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

NOEL LOOMIS, author of this issue's hard-boiled space yarn, ROCKET PANTS, contributes under difficulty the how-it-came-about of his tale. The diffi-



culty, in Loomis' case, stemmed from a burned thumb, which probably will require a grafting job if he doesn't want it to walk around in its bones.

"Right now," he says, "it's wrapped with a hot pack and has a small Turkish towel around it, but my middle finger sticks out and so I can still type after a fashion."

Our sympathies, Exalted Kiwi Loomis, but if you will fool around with rocket jets and the like. . . .

Our author, whom we hereby decorate with the Puce Heart for his wound, continues:

ROCKET PANTS started from an article by somebody (was it Rickenbacker?) on test pilots in modern planes, how (no, I don't think it was) the old-time test pilot flew by the seat of his pants and the mortality rate was something awful, whereas the modern test pilot is a humanized version of the Harvard calculating machine, and it gave me the impression that about all a modern test pilot has to do is read instruments and keep books. (Even so, I suspect the modern test pilot isn't a pterodactyl risk.)

And I thought, well, of course there must be occasions when even a modern test pilot has to fly by the seat of his pants. And there must be plenty of argument among test pilots on that subject. What will it be when rocket-ships get to flying, with many more instruments demanding newer and better arithmetic? Even in such a case, suppose something made the instruments go haywire. Then a little seat-of-the-pants orientation would be mighty helpful.

Rocket Pants, of course, was a natural for his nickname. His opponent was a straight instrument man, and just to pep it up, slightly crooked also. A lot hinged on it, but Rocket Pants was a guy with gumption. He'd even been in a museum and knew coal when he saw it.

In essence, it's the old story of Theory vs. Practice. They're both necessary.

I liked ROCKET PANTS. Damn it, I like all my stories. I even like some that I ought to leave into the waste-basket.

In conclusion, our author makes the announcement that he is soon to become a best-man's problem in front of a church altar, complete with Lohengrin, Mendelssohn and "I Do's." The fellow just can't help getting

burnt, it seems. Anyway, congratulations as well as condolences are in order.

Now the pride of New Jersey STF chimes in with what lurked in his cerebellum whilst he was conceiving and typing UNDERMOST, which we hope you have already read and enjoyed. Says Manly:

It may be philosophized that the one planet we cannot see plainly, even with the best telescope, is our own. Certainly we cannot foretell the future, any more than a generation ago we could visualize clearly the fantastic picture of global war, complete with dread mechanical juggernauts of water, land and air. Yet the suggestion of subways between continents is not completely a shot in the dark. Agitation for a tunnel under the English Channel began in the nineteenth century. A travelway under the Bosphorus was suggested centuries before that.

Legends say that the apes themselves dug a passage from Morocco to Gibraltar. Meanwhile, brilliant careers are being literally hewn out in tubes through the rocks that underlie this wide estuary or that around Manhattan. The subway engineer thinks of larger enterprises, and larger. What will be the final limit of his effort, save the width of the oceans themselves?

The biggest liner and the most powerful aircraft cannot overcome bad weather always. But storms never rise in the depths of Earth, unless to bother human hearts, the one great unpredictability. That is the story of UNDERMOST.

Pee-lot Wellman seems to have been in pensive mood when he created his subterranean story. But the Sarge thinks you'll agree that he came up with a good solid rip-roaring yarn in the best Wellman tradition.

Ed Hamilton is unlikely to be a stranger to any of you who have ever read this magazine before. The creator of CAPTAIN FUTURE is one of the most productive and successful of all science-fiction authors. Now he takes time out from his typewriter toiling to give you a glimpse of what was in the back of his mind when he conceived INDESTRUCTIBLE MAN. Says Ed:

INDESTRUCTIBLE MAN is intended primarily as an entertaining yarn, and I hope the readers find it such. Yet I would like to point out that, fantastic as it may seem, there is no inherent impossibility in the scientific basis of the story.

Since studying the phenomenon of biological regeneration in college textbooks years ago, I've thought many times that it might some day be possible to isolate the secret of regeneration and use it for the swift cure of wounds. If it worked swiftly enough, it would make a man practically invulnerable.

A fantastic speculation? Sure it is. But I'm hanged if it's any more fantastic than some of the things that appeared in science-fiction magazines not so long ago and that have already been realized.

I can remember that back around 1926 when some of us wrote yarns about robot flying invaders who attacked America with atomic weapons and so on, they seemed pretty wild stuff not only to the readers but to ourselves. I don't think that many of us honestly expected ever to live to see anything like that. But now our "wild" stories of twenty years ago look pretty tame.

I don't say that indestructible men are going to pop out of the laboratories in the near future. But in view of all the other things that are popping out of the laboratories in this year 1945, I'm keeping my fingers crossed!

Thanks a lot, Ed. We're keeping our fingers crossed too, just in case. Which just about winds us up on this issue of the old Xeno crate. So we shall be bidding you adieu until the next time around for this department.

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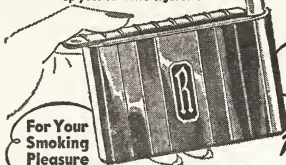
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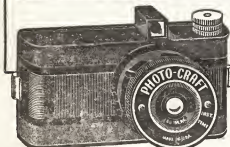
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